These Woods Are More My Kin Than Thee

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These Woods Are More My Kin Than Thee

by stranded_labyrinth

Summary

“I was promised a *bride*.”

Despite it surely being a danger to his life, Hannibal grinned.

“You weren’t promised anything,” Hannibal corrected. “You were *offered* one. The possibility was still being explored. Taking does not mean fulfilling a promise that never existed.”

He could see it beautifully clear, the flickers of rage etching themselves into the man’s face. Hannibal had known who he was dealing with the moment a bride was mentioned, what brand of man, what brand of *beast*, and yet, even now, he was nothing short of amused.

The oh so fearsome *lycan king*, irritated that he’d plucked the wrong noble out of the other kingdom.

Hannibal, who has been denied his nobility, his family, and his very humanity, has taken to making the absolute most out of everything he has left in his life, be it nature, freedom of expression, or his innate ability to get under his uncle's skin.

When the kingdom's fears about the lycanthrope in the neighboring woods begin to mount, Hannibal must also learn to make the most out of being unintentionally thrust into the center of it all.

Notes

i wrote this on a deadline crunch and i am genuinely very afraid that i've somehow managed to miss a very important tag so...viewer discretion is advised?

for best experience, don't take any of the tags lightly. i very much mean that.

enjoy!

The flowers never looked quite right.

That wasn't to say that they weren't just as beautiful as flowers could always be. Imperfect, certainly, imbued with the more wild essence of nature that ran around the castle grounds and into the world beyond, further and further into lands that he had never been and never would be. Imperfection was written in every detail of the world, the balance between mother earth's artful design and the chaotic nature of allowing things both alive and not to lay themselves as they please. Nobody forced the mountains to peak, nor the trees to have their bark swirl, nor these flowers to have the same amount of petals as each of their own kind.

Well, perhaps someone could. Perhaps *he* could. But no, he'd stopped meddling with the flowers long ago.

There had been a time in which he had tended to the gardens by hand, accompanied by the workers of the castle grounds, the arrangements his mother enjoyed always remaining etched deep into his mind. Ensuring that flowers would come to grow all of their petals and never be snuffed out far too early.

Even then, there was nothing to be done about the natural differences and defects between them. Some grew to be shorter or taller than the others, some had more thorns, some had petals that wilted no matter how much he had tended to them. When he was a child he would grow frustrated with these differences, plucking the unfit flowers in one swift motion until their roots dangled in the air, dropping little tufts of grass and dirt onto the ground below.

His mother had put a stop to that. Never a woman of rage, despite how egregiously he was ruining her personal garden, she gently cupped his hands and set the flower down with him, letting it lay across the grass he stood in as she knelt.

"Every flower grows differently," she had told him. "None are worth less than any other. Nature has its ways of creating variety, so that our eyes never get bored, and our souls never grow cold. Look at how beautiful this flower's petals were, pink and soft. It won't grow anymore, it's dead now."

He could still remember the way his own face had scrunched up, the sobs nearly torn from his throat the moment he could fully understand just how much he had *ruined* something beautiful. He could remember his mother bringing her arms around him until he curled up beside her rounded stomach, pregnant with future life that he lay beside, a little bundle of shame.

She had eased his worries then. “The flowers feel no pain, but they still do not deserve to die,” she had explained. “Many things in our world are worth keeping for their beauty. We have to find the beauty in everything, love, before we allow ourselves to grow unkind with disgust. Never let yourself succumb to having such a cold soul.”

Such complicated yet simple words, and still he had understood them, even back then. He thought back to them frequently, to remember the kindness she had shown the world, even if it had shown her none in return.

His mother had always relayed to him the beauty of the world, even if it was a dangerous thing. He was never to leave the castle grounds, at least not until he was much older, and still he was never to venture into the woods. Despite the thick groves of trees and the snow-tipped mountains off in the distance, with fields of flowers and wild grass at their base, danger lurked in every corner, with monsters and mongrels hiding in every shadow they could find, waiting for a naive soul to wander too far into their territory.

He had always thought it to be something adults told children for the sake of giving a dramatic warning, inciting fear with every word so that the children would not disobey and go running off where they couldn’t be found, or could possibly be hurt. He had never known back then just how easily the woods plucked at every brand of naivety that entered, until every morsel of innocence was severed entirely, like meat picked clean from a bone.

He learned soon enough.

He could remember his sister’s little hands grasping for the petals on every pink flower she could find. He always laughed alongside his mother, gently guiding her hands away. He could remember his mother turning her back for all of ten seconds before she would look their way again, raising her brow at him and yet unable to help but grin when she saw her daughter holding a pink flower in her hand, plucked by her older brother to be hers and hers alone.

He could remember how she always loved the little ones, plucked before they were fully grown so that their petals remained small and capable of being held in the palm of one of her hands. He could remember her giggles every time he picked one for her, whether he tucked it into her hair or braided many of them to create a crown. His mother had never once scolded him for it, because as much as he was ending the lives of those flowers, he was creating something far more beautiful in the pure joy found in the sound of his sister's laughter.

He couldn't remember when he had last heard it.

The woods were far different to the castle grounds, almost every instance of sunlight feeling like a pinhole through the dark canopies above. What had seemed like beautiful trees at a distance felt like spiked columns up close, tall and towering over their little bodies as they were dragged along.

He could remember wondering what his mother would think. He could remember his sister crying for her. He could remember not knowing how to assure her beyond holding onto her as tightly as his frail arms could.

Winter had made the woods all the more threatening, with the leaves that had masked the spiny branches up top having fallen completely to the forest floor, gone and nearly forgotten in the snow.

The same could be said for many things in the woods that winter. The hut, the remnants of campfires, the old coats of strange men, and the partial remains of a young girl.

For all the renown and excellence that existed in that castle, the family was always held in the highest honor. Not in the highest position of royalty, but the highest for nobility, they had made a name for themselves through their kindness to the public alone. No one had thought that even the woods that lay beyond the castle could ruin such a beautiful and lively gift to that countryside, every bit of life within that close family a spark to light the way for all others around to follow.

And yet still, the essence of nature was not to allow things to survive solely for their beauty. That was far too human of a trait for it to uphold. Two members of that family had entered

those woods, and only one had returned.

Every step was agony as he had to lift his legs in and out of the heavy snow in repetitive motions, his stomach gnawing angrily at itself for lack of nourishment beyond the bowl of broth he had been given two days prior. All he could think of was his own hunger, and how the adults had always warned him of the danger of the woods, and how safety would only come to him on the castle grounds.

Everything after on that day was a blur, save for the particular darkness of a large room within the castle, with only a single fireplace to light the entire thing in the dead of winter. He could remember being led inside, a warm hand on his shoulder unlike any he had felt before.

And he could remember horrible, horrible outrage.

“Changeling!” the man cried as he rose from that seat, a seat that this poor boy had only ever seen his father sit in. He couldn’t remember being more confused. Why was somebody else in his father’s seat? Why was he yelling?

“Robertus, it’s Hannibal!” the woman beside him urged. “This is your *nephew* !”

“My brother’s child is long dead,” Robertus hissed, uncaring of the fact that he was speaking so cruelly to his own wife. “Do not bring me this thing and claim it can take his place!”

“Will you not be grateful that he is alive?” she argued, both of her hands resting on Hannibal’s small shoulders. He could still remember the ache of her leaning against them. “Will you not be grateful that both of your brother’s children are not lost?”

“That girl was scarcely old enough to say her own name!” Robertus cried, pointing a boney finger in Hannibal’s face. “And I’ll be damned before I let a vile creation of the fae that took her come and ruin her home!”

For as long as Hannibal could remember in his life with Robertus, such had always been the cycle of events. Hannibal would exist in his sights, some odd thing that his uncle had no love for, and Robertus would return to his age old rampage, insisting that the boy was not human, that he was nothing more than a changeling come to replace the real children.

That it would have been better for him to perish in those woods instead of Mischa.

At times, Hannibal would agree.

Hannibal had tried to regain some semblance of control over his life, but ignoring his uncle's outcries proved an impossible task. Tending to the flowers— nearly believing that if he worked quietly enough, he could hear his mother's sighs and his sister's giggles— had only ever seemed to be another sign of his fae nature in his uncle's eyes. The ability to so easily tend to nature had gone from a skill he had been taught to nothing more than a damning curse, as vile and disgusting as every other aspect of himself.

Unfortunately, there were times where Hannibal simply had to choose peace. Such was the nature of a young count.

And so he watched as every year, a new stranger's hands would touch his mother's garden, his own hands forbidden from the work by the notion of the consequences for giving into his uncle's deluded mind. He felt his hands twitch as the laborer tore up the unfit flowers, until finally his voice would enter the air, tense yet always gentle, confusing the gardeners and making them nervous all in the same breath.

"Give it to me."

Never a stronger demand than that.

And so he kept two flowers by his bedroom window at all times. Always one that had grown to its full beauty, and one that had been snuffed out before it grew enough petals. Always kept in a vase— or, well, a lumpy bit of pottery that she had made him.

Every day that he looked at it, he could still hear her little voice as she had handed it to him with such a big smile.

“Anniba!”

The end of summer had always felt special, marked by sunny skies that illuminated changing trees and steadily rotting foliage. There was nobody tending to the garden at this time, save for those tasked with clearing the castle grounds of every decaying thing, swiping aside the corpses of once beautiful things so that when the snow eventually came, none of the living would be tripping over the dead.

Hannibal’s feelings on the matter, like all things, were complicated at best. It felt dishonorable to disturb so many decaying things, shoving their rotten bodies aside to make room for whoever felt the need to walk past. And yet, would it not be even more dishonorable to trample the dead underfoot, uncaring of the many thousands of graves that lay below?

Hannibal had said as much in the presence of his uncle once, when he was younger, though it was mostly directed to his aunt. She had given him a pitying look before his uncle went on another tirade, spouting about how leaves and plants are not *corpses* , and how only some horrible woodland spirit would care so heavily about such a thing.

It was that day, Hannibal believed, that he began to fully register that anything and everything he did or said would be nothing more than further “evidence” for his uncle’s grand delusions. And so, he had begun the process of learning to be seen as rarely as possible, and heard even less frequently than that.

Still, the matter couldn’t be wholly avoided. They still lived together, after all, and after the passing of Lady Murasaki when Hannibal was still a teenager, they were the only family to be found within the castle walls.

Of course, Robertus would never act like it, not that Hannibal really ever expected him to.

Hannibal did not take to disappointing himself, and so he operated on expectations derived from patterns. After so many years, it had served him well, learning to anticipate his uncle's deluded fury that could spring up in what felt like an instant to anyone else.

And yet, even with all of this, Hannibal refused to allow such things to render him *controlled* . If his every possible movement was to result in him being accused of being some supernatural thing, something simultaneously more than human and less than human all in the same breath, then what business would he have shortening life's great experiences for the sake of some false hope that he may earn more respect than he did?

Of course, as always, he was proven right again. Robertus had given him incredibly odd looks, and yet had never once instructed him to change out of the beautiful gowns Hannibal began to don, because what would the point be? Robertus would only shake his head, muttering on about the changeling not even knowing what brand of human to present itself as, and then move on with his day.

It was the closest thing to a blessing Hannibal had in his life, that ignorance.

Plenty of the women in both high and low society within these castle walls had warned him of the restrictive nature of the dresses someone of his class was meant to wear, and he did not disregard these warnings. No, he heard them well, and such was why he never wore a bony corset in the summer months, simply lacing his own dress tightly in the back and otherwise letting the fabric flow freely around him when he went outside. The breeze billowed those grand sundresses just right, each and every time, like mother nature herself was giving him her utmost approval.

He returned her blessing tenfold, running through the warm grass with nothing but the skin of his soles touching her gift to him, agilely avoiding trodding over the corpses of her young.

None of these things had ever changed Robertus' mind about him, nor did Hannibal ever expect them to. He would not consider it feeding into Robertus' twisted mind as much as he would simply consider it… *freedom* .

But such thoughts would always be how his uncle operated. And such things were exactly why, when Hannibal first heard him talk of the “lycan king” in the north…

Well. Quite frankly, Hannibal had thought that the old man had finally gone mad.

It was one of those days between the seasons, Hannibal returning inside and brushing his dirtied soles on the rug by the door. It made the nearest servant cringe, knowing that they would have to clean it. Hannibal would normally never be so careless about giving the castle servants more work to do, but then again, this man had referred to him as a ‘whore of the devil’ to his uncle when he was only thirteen, so how much could anyone truly convince him that this man didn’t deserve having to clean the filth that Hannibal brought inside?

His feet padded across the cool stones of the castle floors as he ventured down the halls, hearing some minor commotion from one of Robertus’ many firelit rooms. It was one that was decorated to high heaven, meant for inviting great guests to gather ‘round a table and discuss whatever matters of their status seemed to be of great news.

Despite the importance of such gatherings, Hannibal never once allowed his uncle the pleasure of having him hide away from them. The same went for that day, where he stepped just past the threshold of the room, his pale blue gown dirtied at the bottom hems from his time outdoors.

The viscounts and barons turned to him as he entered, eyes wide with shock. Hannibal resisted the urge to make his displeasure clear, but given that these men had seen him for years, he never understood why they looked at him with such disgusted surprise.

“Don’t mind the girl,” Robertus urged with a quick wave of his hand. “She comes and goes.”

Ah, yes, that had been another one of his uncle’s swell traits. Ever since he realized that Hannibal had taken to these dresses regularly, as opposed to rare occasions or never at all, he enjoyed insisting to others that this creature in his home was a girl.

Not that Hannibal minded horribly, but the intention was clear nonetheless.

“You’re talking about that *lycanthrope* again, uncle,” Hannibal said, letting his hands rest behind his back, one hand holding the wrist of another, his tone as sweet as could be. “This is the fourth time this fortnight. Are you sure you don’t need to rest?”

The snickers of the men in the room were just barely audible, the product of not being able to hold it in. Such was the game Hannibal decided they would play: If Robertus was to insist that he were some female changeling, Hannibal would not hesitate to point out his madness to a crowd. Equivalent exchange and all that.

Robertus scowled, though he did not scold him at all for the comment. Hannibal had learned by the time he was nine, after returning to the castle from the woods, that his uncle never bothered to discipline him only because he didn’t deem it necessary. Why bother trying to gather the wits of a fae?

“You may have your fears of that lycanthrope quelled by insisting on my insanity,” Robertus said, raising a finger to point in his direction, “but your denial is nothing more than a childish attempt at averting your eyes from the truth. The lycan king has turned another village to blood and ash today, with not a soul spared lest they ran.”

“Your talk is as absurd as when you began,” Hannibal insisted gently. “Why would a king exercise his authority only to attack a small village? Are you fully sure that there was no smaller ranking official who executed such a thing?”

He waited until the barons and viscounts in the room turned to one another, seeming to consider the idea, before adding: “A nearby count, perhaps?”

The rage was evident in the pulsing of a vein on Robertus’ forehead, as well as the intensified scowl on his lips. Otherwise, he did not give into the clear insult.

“The lycan king has no counts,” Robertus went on. “No nobility in his horrid land. He is the only authority, and all must answer to him and him alone.”

“My hunters have always told me that that is how wolves behave,” a viscount piped up from the other end of the room. “Whenever one of their men have died from venturing too close to a wolf’s den, there had always been several of them, but one always approached and attacked first. Those who survive always tell the same tale. It must be no different for a lycanthrope.”

Hannibal’s brow furrowed somewhat, as the severity of the situation dawned on him. Collective madness was not as common as some may think, and while the higher classes could be truly dense when it came to what constituted danger…he realized that these were not merely the ramblings of one mad count, accepted at face value by a select few.

“He must have been passionate to personally take to destroying a village,” Hannibal said. “What spurred such a thing on?”

“What care do you have?” Robertus hissed. “This is evidently not your concern.”

“You scold me for both my lack of concern and having any at all?” Hannibal asked, turning his head back towards his uncle. “Which response would please you?”

The count, countered at last, seemed to have no true response. Hannibal, in his own annoyance, did not consider it a victory.

“The girl’s nearly twenty now, isn’t she?” another baron piped up, anxiously attempting to settle the room. “Surely the countess should–”

“She is not a countess!” Robertus shouted, wheeling on the far too confident baron. “She is not my heir! Any heir of mine perished in the lycan’s woods over a decade ago!”

The silence that followed was deafening, physically overwhelming with the tension that came with it. Such was what followed any time Robertus said such a thing in front of company, and yet, he had never stopped. It was no secret to anybody that Hannibal was meant to be in Robertus’ place, given his father had been the *actual* count and Robertus had been no more than a placeholder…but given the man’s frequent tirades and skillful ability to put fear into the heart of anyone who dared to challenge him, who would be the one to insist he step down?

“Uncle,” Hannibal spoke again, slower now and with a tone that spoke to the grave seriousness of the situation at hand, “what spurred the lycan king on?”

Robertus did not have time to settle himself and answer his nephew. A viscount spoke up first, disturbed by the lack of composure at the head of the room and finding some brand of solace in the composure the young count showed instead.

“A madman,” he explained. “The village had apparently done nothing about it. A madman was constantly raving about, and when let be for long enough, he slaughtered a family.”

The viscount swallowed, not even Hannibal’s composure enough to render him comfortable enough to continue. He forced himself to recount it anyway, albeit with great strain: “Young children as well. He did not discriminate with who he killed or now.”

Hannibal, of course, did not flinch. He did not shy away from the tale, nor react with nearly as much horror as the others in the room. Unlike them, brought up by wealthy families in safe little homes, their biggest terror in their lives being when a servant spoke with a slightly agitated tone towards them, Hannibal was not nearly so sheltered. He knew the horrors of facing a madman very well by then, especially the sort who was capable of such sincere evil that they would not bat an eye when it came to slaughtering an innocent child.

On Mischa’s soul, he would not shy away from the horror of such a thing.

“The village did nothing, you said?” Hannibal asked.

The viscount nodded, becoming the sole storyteller as the others looked away in nervous discomfort.

“Yes,” he answered. “Nothing worth anything…The madman was the brother of the village priest. He determined him sick in the soul rather than sick in the mind or body, and thus his sole punishment was remaining comfortably living within the priest’s residence. The survivors of the massacre told the world as much, nearly boiling with the devil’s rage in their

eyes, and they said it must have been an omen. That God himself let the devil wreak havoc on their village as punishment for a supposedly holy man harboring a killer."

Hannibal, listening with intent, did not shy away from this bit, either. As a matter of fact, in the face of the discomfort of the room, the corners of his mouth upturned slightly, the ghost of a smile on his lips. Just enough for the others to see.

"The devil's rage after the devil's blessing…How fascinating," he commented, before turning to his uncle once more. "You speak of this lycan king as though he's mad, or some horrific evil the likes of which the world cannot comprehend. Wars have been started over less…If he punished those who harbored a killer, is he not a just man?"

"He is no man!" Robertus shouted back, face contorting with the effort. "His very existence is demonic work, and even if God were to cast a blessed eye upon him, what sort of *just* king would ransack an entire village, slaughtering nearly everyone, for the work of one man? How could a *just king* perform such a deed?"

Hannibal's posture remained perfect, even as he nearly felt the little bits of spittle from his uncle's tirade. He was far too used to these sorts of ramblings to even blink in the face of one, much to the surprise of everyone in the room.

"Because," Hannibal answered calmly, "nobody took matters into their own hands."

It was as though the very air of the room changed, frigid chills running along the skin of everyone present except for the Lecters. The implication was clear, but even so,Hannibal refused to allow them the pleasure of basking in the silence afterward. He would not allow them to shy away from the horror any longer.

"If everyone in that village knew where the madman resided," he continued, "then everyone was complicit in allowing his survival. Unless he was shackled in his comfortable chambers, he could have escaped again. *Killed* again. Every person in that village, save for the children, was complicit in harboring a killer alongside that priest."

The viscount, shaking his head, attempted to swallow his nerves. “Exactly that...The lycan did not only kill the adults. Children were found strewn about alongside their families.”

Hannibal’s eyes met the viscount’s, equally as still as his posture remained. The viscount just barely managed not to tremble, likely feeling for the very first time as though Robertus’ accusations against this young adult could possibly be correct.

Hannibal would not be shocked. The viscount would not be the first to be swayed.

“The lycan only did what the killer would have done,” Hannibal stated, no amount of calmness having left his voice. “Anyone who allowed his survival risked the slaughter of their children. They did not care about those children’s lives any more than the supposedly mad killer did.”

Hannibal took a singular step forward then, relishing in the way that every man in the room flinched back in time with his movement.

“I have seen calculated evil, Viscount,” Hannibal said, inclining his head slightly. “The evil you speak of resides in the killer, not the king.”

Only now, as he watched the nobles look between one another, nervous as though they had been proven wrong about something, as though some prior discussion had been upturned…he felt a chill in his own spine, an incredibly rare feeling for him. His eyes scattered around the room, his face suddenly far more rigid than before.

“Why were you speaking so urgently of the lycan king?” Hannibal asked at last.

There was a brief lull in the room, men looking between one another to determine whether to let another brand of horror known. A different voice, that of a baron who had not yet been heard during the time Hannibal was present, decided to make itself known.

“He is a monster and yet he is a man,” the baron explained. “More monster than man, but man all the same, despite what the count believes. A king with no council, nor consort, nor heir. A man just as any other, solitary in a way that is unnatural for either creature within himself.”

The room fell into silence. No one dared to speak afterwards, not as they watched the eyes of the young count grow colder and colder, even as his face remained entirely the same.

“Who are you sending off to be his bride?” Hannibal asked, his voice quieter than it had been before. A very, very dangerous thing.

“No one knows,” the viscount from before assured him. “It is not for us to decide, though we’ve been discussing it. Only counts and higher can put forth any suggestion for a bride.”

The speed at which Hannibal’s head turned towards his uncle was nearly unnatural, startling the viscounts and barons again.

“Uncle–”

“Oh don’t get your gown in a tizzy,” Robertus spat, though his lips twitched upward. He was *entertained* by Hannibal’s protest. “No one would be foolish enough to send the likes of *you* to a *king* , lycan or otherwise. We’d all be killed for sending him a changeling. No, beings of the devil want pretty, holy things to corrupt with their darkness. He would want you even less than the rest of us.”

“My concern does not lie with me,” Hannibal replied swiftly. It was a lie at best, but he knew better than to acknowledge any brand of concern for himself around that man. “Your solution for such an enraged beast of a man is to sacrifice to him?”

“A sacrifice–” a viscount repeated, as though in disbelief. “You misunderstand, it would be a wedding by all accounts, legitimate in all eyes, including God’s.”

“A legitimate wedding in the eyes of God for a lycanthrope?” Hannibal asked, only turning to face the man at the end of his question. “May I ask which priest will ordain this?”

When Hannibal was met with nothing but silence, he turned fully to the man, taking a step forward.

“Which church within this kingdom will allow a lycanthrope to wed within its walls? Or were you referring to a legitimate wedding within *his* kingdom, in which case, how are we to know? Will you be doing the honors of surveying the area to ensure that a legitimate wedding can take place, or are we simply assuming that–”

“Enough!” Robertus shouted, stumbling forward in a sudden enraged frenzy. His hand shot outward, grabbing his nephew by the arm and wrenching him away from the viscount, continuing to pull until they were at the door.

“You will not lure anyone else into those woods, changeling!” Robertus spat, shoving Hannibal back out into the hall with such force that the boy nearly stumbled over his gown. “These matters do not, and will not, concern you!”

Before Hannibal had so much as an opportunity for response, the large doors were slammed shut, loud enough to make the entire hallway tremble in its wake.

Hannibal faced the door, standing entirely still, for an amount of time that not even he kept count of. His face remained as rigid as the stones around him, set in place by the mortar of his mind. He never cared much for the chatter of the nobles, much less the chatter brought about by their fear, but even then, he could never bring himself to stand and allow nonsensical drivel to go unquestioned.

That being said, he was far from a fool. Asking nobles to be reasonable people was akin to asking the nearest cat to kindly stop batting its paws at the mice; they would be confused, and in their confusion, outraged, insisting this was the natural order and most definitely not some predator playing with their food.

Not that he could blame anyone who chose to toy with their prey. The part that ate at him was the hypocrisy of it, the insistence that they were somehow morally above another who did the same as them. They feared the lycan king so much for supposedly allowing innocents to be in harm's way due to one guilty party, and yet here they were, dancing around the very real cruelty of sending an innocent party to their inevitable demise to deal with another who was — apparently— guilty. It was nothing short of backwards logic.

Then again, the most reasonable people did not often scramble for power. Asking nobles to be reasonable was like–

His hands balled into fists at his sides. He was thinking circles around himself. His frustrations did not typically mount so high, either overcome with ease or swiftly pushed far back enough that it would not cloud his mind. And yet somehow, this situation was infuriating enough that his once pristine flow of thoughts was circling in on itself, nothing more than a cycle of rage.

And he knew it was because he'd finally been kicked out of the room. And he *hated* that Robertus had taken such an easy victory.

At long last, he stormed off down the hall, his dress billowing in the aftermath.

He needed a quieter space to properly think before he did something impulsive.

There was only one other time that the castle had been so absurdly quiet.

It was a time he kept locked away deep in his mind, with the intention of keeping it inaccessible to even himself. And yet, as the silence that swept through the halls matched that of those days and the sound of nothing but his own footsteps made his very skin crawl with familiarity, the chains that kept that chest closed were beginning to rattle and shake. He could

nearly visualize the rust rubbing off of them and onto the floor, flexibility being granted to that which had been kept so stationary that it had long ago lost the ability to move– until now.

He left the castle walls this time, knowing his mind was in danger.

The castle grounds remained as peaceful as ever, despite having the same silence as inside. That was to say, the silence came only from a lack of people, and once outdoors, the sound was quickly replaced with that of nature's typical chatter: blowing wind and shuffling leaves, bird calls and the final flights of insects before autumn fully sets in and they freeze and die. Here, the lack of human presence had gone from overwhelming to entirely natural, rendering him incapable of feeling the solitude that had been pushed onto him.

Everyone else from that castle had been sent away in some capacity, either to go home to their families if they did not live within the walls, or to travel alongside the count as he left for the king's home. It had been a week since Hannibal had first heard of the potential arrangements, and now, every noble of high status was meant to be involved. After all, when it came to sending a bride to another king, no suitor of lower status could possibly be acceptable.

Of course, that meant that *Hannibal* was cordially invited (required) to attend as well. And of course, Robertus had found his way around that obligation, as he always did.

Having everyone depart without waking the young count, there was no doubt that Robertus would use his typical excuse: that Hannibal was simply too *ill* to depart from the castle. Such was the explanation he always gave, knowing at the very least that if he were to speak his mind, he would be seen as mad. But his descriptions of Hannibal always proved enough within the minds of others that he was "ill", and as such, Hannibal's lack of attendance had never been questioned.

At least, not that Hannibal knew of.

There was no doubt in Hannibal's mind that the frequent use of such an excuse was part of what kept Robertus in power in this place. If the real Lecter heir was alive and well, it would be his inherent duty to take over Lecter castle in the position of a count. Robertus still refused to believe that the Lecter heir was alive, but since he could not convince others of that deluded notion, he would instead convince them that the Lecter heir was not *well* .

A nearly classic move, Hannibal thought. How often had a noble or royal done such a thing? How often had it been left out of records, the very existence of a true heir deemed meaningless thanks to the fabrications of those in the generation before?

It was much easier to think, now that the silence wasn't so overwhelming. Easier to allow his mind to insist upon such a topic as well, now that there was no one else on the castle grounds…

No gardeners.

Hannibal was knelt by his mother's flowers, his eyes scanning the bright colors until they would land on exactly what he was looking for. Not that it took much effort, the premature pink flowers sticking out just as they had years ago, observable easily enough for Mischa to spot them. He needed to replace the flower in his vase, and the only difficult choice now was to determine which one to pick.

He could pluck the one that had barely grown at all, and yet, that didn't seem much like her. As little life as she had had, she had longer to live than a bud that small. He could go for the one that was just under the height of the mature flowers, but no, that didn't feel accurate either. Too young and too old, his options always seemed.

As much as these flowers were meant to be a sign of her, his final ability to have any outward notion of respect toward her, he was always left feeling as though he was doing her a great disservice.

Or perhaps he was no longer remembering which ones she liked accurately. That thought made his skin crawl.

The flower in front of him was out of the ground before he'd even registered that he'd killed it. A sudden clouded mind had taken over him, boiling his blood and icing his skin and clenching his jaw until he swore his teeth could crack. He was *not* forgetting her. He was the only one who could remember her.

No matter what that crusted fake count with one foot in the grave thought.

He released a breath, opening his palm and letting the flower fall onto the grass below, just in front of his dress. It was the wrong flower, after all– only slightly smaller than the fully mature ones. Its life was taken only for being slightly imperfect, at that point.

His next breath released less steady than the first, tears stinging the corners of his eyes as his fists clenched over his covered thighs. He could imagine his mother beside him, unwilling to scold him and yet disappointed all the same.

"Every flower grows differently. None are worth less than any other. Nature has its ways of creating variety, so that our eyes never get bored, and our souls never grow cold. Look at how beautiful this flower's petals were, pink and soft. It won't grow anymore, it's dead now."

The memory felt as though it *burned* his brain, singeing every neuron it passed through until there was nothing left in its wake except embers and char. A forest fire of the past, a cemetery of everything he once loved.

"The flowers feel no pain, but they still do not deserve to die. Many things in our world are worth keeping for their beauty. We have to find the beauty in everything, love, before we allow ourselves to grow unkind with disgust. Never let yourself succumb to having such a cold soul."

His fingers dug into his dress, his head lowered as his eyes squeezed shut. The first hiccuping sob fell from his mouth without his permission, as though his body were betraying him. For once, he didn't want to think about her. He didn't want to remember her sad smile as she watched what were likely the first signs of the thing he would become. He didn't want to remember the patience she had for him anyway. He didn't want to remember the warmth he felt when she held him that day to console him for being a monster.

He didn't want to remember what the life in her stomach tasted like.

He had failed her, hadn't he? Her one piece of advice to him, to find the beauty in everything and never allow himself to grow unkind with disgust, to never let himself succumb to having

a cold soul…He had found beauty in everything, alright. There was beauty everywhere, in the rolling hills, in the sun, in the snow, in the rain, in the decaying matter all around him come autumn and winter, in the dead bodies they would occasionally find in the chambers of old maids that passed in their sleep, on the tables in the workrooms of medicine men where he was forbidden from entering but ventured into anyway.

There was beauty in everything, and he was disgusted with everything. He was disgusted with the pigs that surrounded him, who refused to find beauty in life's pleasures both simple and complex. He was disgusted by their ego, their vanity, their lack of regard for the lives of those around them. He was disgusted by the way that so much of humanity had lost any sense of humanity at all.

And yet, his disgust never burned with rage. It didn't redden his face and tense his muscles and make him impulsive with violent outbursts. No, his disgust never ran hot.

His disgust ran cold.

His soul was the coldest he had ever come across, his values frozen from the moment they'd developed, his expectations for the world frigid as ever. He was cold in the way that he could cease to find any degree of sympathy for those who had none for others. He was cold in the way that he could so quickly deem another man unworthy of living if they took the human experience for granted. He was cold towards their arrogance, he was cold towards their ignorance.

He was cold towards their discourtesy.

He sat upright, his spine pin straight as he lifted his hands to wipe at his eyes. His emotions had never died away with his soul, and as much as he could consider that a blessing, he could just as easily decide it was a curse. He took a deep breath through his nose, as though he could will away the newfound puffiness of his eyes and cheeks with a single inhale.

As soon as his own gratuitous noise had ceased, his ears felt as though they'd gone numb, though he quickly realized that that was the effect of the silence surrounding him. The hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, an involuntary reaction that made him more curious than afraid.

It dawned on him, the moment he'd stopped crying, that the sounds of nature had ceased.

Hannibal stood, turning towards the treeline. It was still a good distance away, even from where he was outside. He knew better than to approach, oh he had *long* known better than that, but at the end of the day…

Curiosity had always been his downfall, hadn't it?

One step forward, accompanied by the soft dragging of his pale blue gown along the grass below…A second step, the only sound being the squishing of grass beneath his feet…

He'd barely had time to register the low growling before it happened.

Hannibal hadn't known the sound of his own scream in a very long time. Even now, over a decade later, it had the same resonance as it did before, the first time he was ever dragged off into those woods by beasts far worse than the monsters people often speak of. Though now, it was less of a singular pitch, and more of a tone that sounded as though it were shredding his vocal chords on its way out.

By the time he'd lifted his head off of the ground after falling so roughly against it, his sights on the beast were entirely blurred. He kicked with his free leg, trying with all his might to get the creature's jaws to unclench from his ankle, but it was no use. Whatever figure it was, large and black as night even in the daylight, it seemed entirely unaffected as it dragged Hannibal along.

As he saw the treeline grow closer and closer until the canopies were hanging right over him, Hannibal wondered if he would have to wait as long as Mischa did to die in those woods.

Despite how it felt, waking was not at all like waking from a nightmare.

Hannibal was not reminded of sitting up in bed as a child, nerves seized by such intense fear that they ran painfully cold for one bright second, his throat instantly wearing down from how hoarsely he screamed for a mother that wouldn't come. He wasn't reminded of the sheer *quickness* that always accompanied it, the only slow thing being the wait for his heart to stop racing.

No, this time, he was reminded of that day he'd escaped the woods. He was reminded of toppling over in exhaustion, before his eyes slowly pried themselves open in the candlelit room. He was reminded of the musty scent of old stones and mortar, of the man of medicine that towered over him as he lay on the table. He was reminded of finally, *finally* , feeling safe.

How could he feel so similarly now?

His arms were the first things to move. Immediately, he registered the feeling of soft furs against his skin, against his arms, his legs, his face…

He shot upright, taking in the full sight of the room he was in. It was dark in the corners, with streams of light coming in through the window, illuminating the entire center of the room. The walls were made from wood, the kind one would see in an esteemed hunting lodge. The bed he was sat in had several fur pelts draped over it, as well as one that had been draped over Hannibal himself before he'd bolted upright.

Hannibal glanced down at last, brow furrowed as his hand ran over the fur. It looked vaguely familiar, and yet, the moment his mind finally settled on a conclusive animal, he immediately wanted to deny it. Not out of horror or fear, but simply because it made no sense. He had no idea how or why anyone could have so many…

So many *wolf* skins.

His memory was failing him. He could remember being in his mother's garden, selecting flowers for his vase. He could remember weeping to himself before registering the silence surrounding him. He could remember turning toward the woods, and then…

He couldn't register the form he saw in his memories. It was vague, a mere approximation of a dark beast, its maw wrapped around his leg, dragging him away into the forest.

He was not given time to dwell on it.

The large bedroom doors creaked open, causing Hannibal to flinch. He'd never known himself to startle easily, and yet, there hadn't been a sound beyond the doors before now. Or perhaps there *had* been, and he'd been too busy registering his situation to hear it.

A figure remained rigidly standing in the doorway, cold eyes cast directly onto Hannibal. The gaze froze him in place, sending his stomach swooping downward.

The man wasn't incredibly tall, but certainly taller than him. His hair was dark and curly, falling into lovely— albeit messy— rings around his head, or so Hannibal could assume from the current lighting. His eyes were cold partially because of the intensity of his gaze, but partially because of their icy color. His skin was pale, and his scowling mouth was not fully hidden by the trimmed beard he donned. While he was not overly broad, his limbs were thick, the limited amount of exposed skin showcasing his muscle.

Over his body, just like on the bed, were the pelts of wolves, secured into place by straps of old, dark leather and buttons made from polished wood.

The two remained like that for some time, simply staring at one another, as though both were waiting for the other to break the silence. Neither was particularly inclined to be the one to do so.

But then again, Hannibal had always been riddled with a less than cautious sense of curiosity.

“Why am I in your bed?”

The man’s fingers clenched around the door he was holding open, a muscle on his jaw twitching mildly. Hannibal hadn’t actually expected him to answer, given how silent he remained after the question was asked, but it would seem this situation was full of surprises for him.

“People typically consummate these things.”

Whether or not he was intending to joke was unclear, given his monotonous tone, but his meaning was heard nonetheless. It sent a chill down Hannibal’s spine, as still as his posture remained, but he found himself not quite filled with fear. A nervous brand of excitement, he supposed.

He’d never dealt with anything of this sort. He’d heard of it, certainly, but he had never personally gotten a chance to engage much with it. No one wanted to risk angering the false count should he discover that somebody had touched the changeling, and so, nobody did. It was *exciting* , being personally faced with someone who wasn’t so careful around him, who was careless enough to be joking about having *sex* with the likes of him.

“Did we?” Hannibal asked. His tone gave nothing away, save for an almost innocent curiosity on the matter.

The man’s brow furrowed for a brief moment before he was able to school his expression, the frown of his face deepening before it settled back into his regular scowl.

“No,” he answered. “You weren’t even awake.” A sharp inhale was drawn in through his nostrils, before he added: “It was the bed or the floor for you, after fainting like that.”

The notion immediately amused Hannibal, though he didn’t risk allowing it to show on his face. The idea of a captor with such *moral* standards was deeply entertaining.

That was, until the man spoke again, and he couldn't help himself.

"I was promised a *bride* ."

Despite it surely being a danger to his life, Hannibal grinned.

"You weren't promised anything," Hannibal corrected. "You were *offered* one. The possibility was still being explored. Taking does not mean fulfilling a promise that never existed."

He could see it beautifully clear, the flickers of rage etching themselves into the man's face. Hannibal had known who he was dealing with the moment a bride was mentioned, what brand of man, what brand of *beast* , and yet, even now, he was nothing short of amused.

The oh so fearsome *lycan king* , irritated that he'd plucked the wrong noble out of the other kingdom.

As underwhelming as it was, Hannibal couldn't say he found himself disappointed to see the monster Robertus raved on about as merely a man. As much as the madman's ramblings had left everyone with a distinct sense of dread when it came to this "lycan" king…Did it not make them alike in their associations, neither of them allowed to be men in the eyes of Robertus Lecter?

Evidently, the king saw a portion of that, albeit far different to what Hannibal had in mind.

"And yet they made you up to seem like a bride," the king argued, his voice dipping low with clear attempts at stabilizing it.

Hannibal could have laughed. Despite how clear the danger he was in was, he could have *laughed* .

“I wear a summer gown and you feel fooled?” he asked, tilting his head, his grin still plastered wide on his face. He hadn’t had so much entertainment in what felt like years. It likely had been. “As though you were tricked? As though you had to discover some sort of truth? May I ask, your majesty, if you’d perhaps *checked* ?”

The king’s eyes flashed wide for a moment, his mouth twisting with the embers of burning humiliation. His hand fell from the door as his eyes finally pulled away from Hannibal, opting to stare off down the hall instead. He looked nearly disgusted, though it was unclear who in the room he was disgusted with.

As hilarious as the idea was, Hannibal supposed the matter was difficult to avoid. He’d already confused most of the population of his own castle, and given there was no fabric beneath his dress to cover the truth…

And yet, as before, he could never stand a man who shied away from the truth, especially the truth of what they had done. If this king had already spared a glance beneath the skirt of his gown, then what was the purpose of looking away now, feigning modesty?

Hannibal pulled the wolf pelt off of his lap, turning his body and stepping down from the bed. Despite having been dragged for so long, he somehow didn’t feel sore in the slightest. He wondered how many aspects of that had been a vision— or some kind of nightmare— instead of reality, given the man that stood before him instead of a beast.

“By all means,” he began, stepping forward and grabbing the skirt of his dress, lifting it slightly off of the floor and exposing his pale legs, “you’re welcome to check again. That is, unless you’re unwilling to risk further disappoi–”

The strike had somehow landed before he’d even seen it coming, arriving harshly enough on his cheek that it sent him off-balance and to the floor. His arms ached from the collision with the ground, though that pain didn’t match the stinging of the side of his face. Hannibal looked up from the wooden floor, brows furrowed. Not quite as defiant as he was simply perplexed.

“ *Succubus* ,” the king hissed, standing above the boy and glaring down. “Wearing ladies’ robes and attempting to entice me to *touch* . Is this their revenge, all for one village? To stick me with the likes of *thee* in the hopes that I would wed thee?”

The king spoke as though warding off a curse, furious and righteous. In response, Hannibal simply stared, observing the throes of the king's brief rage.

"Do you think a jest is enticement?" he asked, sitting upright. "Do you believe an offer to repeat whatever sins you've already committed is *temptation* , your majesty?"

Hannibal had expected the king's blood to boil. He'd anticipated further irritation, provocation, *rage* . He had not anticipated the wave of discomfort that came over the king's face, nearly cringing as the anger drained from him.

"...There is no need to continue calling me that," the king replied at last. "Nobody does, and you will not be the first."

It was fascinating, the way *that* of all things had managed to quell the king's anger. Robertus had insisted that there were no nobles here, but…surely there had been *some* people, weren't there? Subjects for a king?

…Judging by the king's expression, however…

Hannibal wondered if that was why the king spoke the way he did. Why he *behaved* the way that he did. Hannibal wondered, looking at the carefully crafted suit of a barbaric hunter, when the last time was that this king had so much as spoken to another person. Was his solitude why he had no sense of etiquette, nor desire to speak in polite tones when he saw no room for any?

Perhaps, like the gods of old tales, this was truly how he believed weddings to work. Then again, the king was well-spoken enough to ward off Hannibal's attempts at humor, and thus Hannibal could not assume so little of the man's intellect. Then again, Hannibal knew nothing of this place— or of its people, if there had ever been any. There were only so many pieces of information given for him to draw conclusion from. Anything else…well, he would simply have to ask.

“Did you expect to repopulate?” Hannibal asked, voicing implications the moment they dawned on him. “Is that why you wanted a bride?”

The king audibly scoffed, looking away from him again. It was nearly funny: not once did the king seem bothered about the fact that the stolen count was now on the floor. He didn’t seem inclined to offer a hand, nor instruct him to stand on his own. He’d sent Hannibal to the floor and kept him there.

“I wanted a bride because I’d expected one,” he answered. “Whatever would happen after would…depend on the circumstances that followed, I suppose.”

His eyes narrowed then, refocusing on Hannibal.

“The only question that remains is what to do with *you* ,” the king went on. “You cannot reasonably expect me to believe this was in no way a trick. All other heirs were elsewhere.”

“Visiting the king,” Hannibal clarified. “They were arranging who would be sent your way.”

“Lying does not improve your situation,” the king replied, nearly sneering as he said so. “Why would the county heir be left right beside the border?”

“Is it that difficult to believe I was never intended to be sent to you?” Hannibal asked. Agitation was just beginning to color his tone, and he couldn’t stand it. He could normally control himself better than that. But something about speaking with this man, about having even less of his words believed than when he would speak to Robertus, seemed to find every nerve in his system to grate against.

“Then why were you alone?”

“You know nothing of what you’ve come across, do you? Who is to have an interest in keeping watch over me?” Hannibal asked, inclining his head. “The guards who want nothing

to do with me? The servants who have families to return to? The count who convinced all of them that I am inhuman, just as he tried to convince me that you are?"

At that, the king fell quiet. His eyes briefly narrowed for a moment, as though trying to peer into the boy's very head, before his expression began to harden. Evidently, he didn't seem to believe that this boy was lying anymore.

"...You don't believe it?" the king asked, entirely in disbelief. "After what you've witnessed?"

"The woods are cursed with twisted dreams," Hannibal answered. "How am I to know the difference between a dark reality and a dark vision, when you stand here before me as simply a man in wolf pelts, baffled that I do not see you as a lycanthrope?"

At that, the king simply frowned.

"The last time I showed you, you fainted," he argued. "Is that what you're asking for?"

"Do you care so much?" Hannibal asked, blinking. "I've been on your floor for minutes."

The king scoffed again— that would seem to be a growing trend, his irritation towards the young count. Even so, he bent over and reached downward, not so much as giving Hannibal time to reach back before the king grabbed him by his arm, hauling him back onto his feet in one swift *yank* .

And the king did not let go.

"Your gown is filthy," he spoke, reaching his free hand into Hannibal's hair, pulling his fingers downward until they were stopped by a knot. "As is your hair. Kept long and yet not kept at all, it would seem…What am I to do with you?"

As experienced as the young count was at maintaining his composure in the face of clear indignity, there was a drastic difference between his home life and this place. Speaking back with sharp wit to a belligerent count was not the same as being *handled* by some solitary king, whose position Hannibal still found himself questioning. After all, in this room, this man was nothing more than his captor, and an irritable one at that.

Hannibal had already had his fill of captors in these woods, and he was not particularly inclined to have a repeat of events.

“You’ve no obligation to do anything at all with me,” he answered, his eyes growing a coldness that matched the king’s. “Send me on my way and you’ll get your bride.”

“Did you not just tell me there is nobody there to keep watch over you?” the king asked, inclining his head somewhat. “Am I to send the likes of *you* , who seems so inclined to run your mouth and get yourself into whatever brand of trouble you can find, back to a kingdom that would already have my head were it not for their fear of me? No, sending your on your way would be a bigger insult than burning a village. Hell, by the looks of things, they’d burn one of their own just as thanks for keeping you.”

As much as Hannibal could normally steel himself from such things, craft a perfectly impenetrable wall that prevented him from being affected by direct insults…this man, whoever in God’s name he was, had managed to peer directly into his very being within a single interaction, and parse through the information provided until he landed on one painful truth: This boy, heir or otherwise, was not wanted. An heir would not be left behind at such an important event, left alone so close to the woods when danger was prowling, unless those responsible for him simply did not care what happened to him. After all, if Robertus had thought that the *real* Hannibal had died in those woods years ago, what should he care whether this disgusting thing lives or dies?

As well as Hannibal could put his mask on day in and day out, stitch it perfectly closed until there were no cracks to peer through unless he was alone, he had crafted it based on things he was familiar with. Robertus would never be a reasonable man, and so the blows dealt by him washed off with ease, as though they weren’t ever there to begin with. This time, however, this was a complete *stranger* — one who had managed to find exactly what it was about Hannibal that irritated him without accusing him of being anything but human at all, and one who managed to pinpoint exactly what it was that defined Hannibal’s life.

Changeling or otherwise, his own people did not want him.

Hannibal managed to catch the burning in his eyes before it could progress anywhere, as well as still the twitch in his lips before it could make itself known. He hardened his expression, despite doing so allowing deep rage to become evident in his gaze. It was already impossible for him to acknowledge any brand of immaturity that existed within himself, he would sooner die than allow this king to spot any.

“You’ve still no obligation to do anything,” he carried on. It burned him that much hotter to think that, even amidst such painful words from the king, it was all spoken as though he was being done a favor by being kept here. “Everything you complain of could be resolved with a *bath* .”

The king simply stared, acknowledging the comment without reacting to it in any way. His gaze was emotionless now, even in response to the young count’s glare.

And then the king turned, pulling the boy by his arm out of the room.

Hannibal was briefly yanked into motion, before he registered what was happening and jammed his heels into the floor, attempting to pull himself out of the king’s grip.

“You–! Let *go* !” he demanded, teeth clenched as he struggled. “I’m more than capable of moving on my own!”

“Somehow, I doubt that,” the king commented in a flat tone. “You kept yourself on the floor out of spite. You would sooner let yourself rot in filth than get yourself clean when you could simply have someone else do it for you. Isn’t that right, *countess* ?”

Hannibal was ready to respond, something sharp and cruel on the tip of his tongue, before the king suddenly turned to him again, grabbing him around the middle and hoisting him into the air as he squealed, tossing the boy over his shoulder to carry off with greater ease.

Infuriated , the count kicked to no avail, beating his fists on the wolf pelts that covered the king's back.

"Cannot so much as let me walk on my own!" he spat. "Far too delighted with taking me wherever you'd like, *your majesty* ?"

Down the hall, not far outside of the bedroom, the king tossed the young count right back down onto the floor, not caring to ensure a decent enough landing as the boy fell onto the rug with a gasp.

Hannibal sat upright, glaring at the king (who was currently beginning to light a fire beneath the tub, heating water that had apparently already been in there), his hands balling into fists against the bear skin he now sat on. In his fury, he did not even consider the implications of this man being able to have something like that in his home. He tossed his head back, getting his lengthy dark blonde hair out of his face.

"No wonder you've no nobles," he hissed. "You've no respect for any of them. They likely ran, didn't they?"

"Couldn't run," the king answered simply.

At last, Hannibal had nothing else to say.

Far too many questions were racing through his mind for him to settle on one that was good enough to ask aloud. As it was, Hannibal was attempting to piece together how much or how little knowledge this king had of the adjacent kingdom, let alone how he knew of Hannibal's status. It was impossible to determine what sort of kingdom the "lycan" king ruled, given he did not present himself as regally as a king nor want to be addressed as one, and now to have that frankly ominous implication spoken aloud?

With everything he'd heard about this man put together…perhaps this wouldn't turn out so badly after all.

At least, so he thought for a moment.

The king tested the water again, putting the fire out beneath the tub. He turned to Hannibal then, grabbing his arm and hauling him back onto his feet once more, before reaching for Hannibal's dress.

Then, and only then, did Hannibal begin to fight again.

"I can bathe on my own," he protested, "and I certainly know how to undress myself!"

"You can't so much as be trusted to be left in a garden on your own," the king mocked, ignoring the boy's protests to continue grabbing at the gown. "Let this be easier on us both."

"Let go!" the young count spat, attempting to wrench the fabric from the king's hands. "You and your obsession with peeping underneath– You'll ruin it, you wretched thing!"

Finally, the king's already limited patience dwindled. His lip curled up in nearly a snarl, and he roughly grabbed at Hannibal once more.

"I'll sooner tear this flimsy fabric apart myself than let you speak to me that way," he snapped, pulling the boy forward again.

"I'll speak how I please," the boy snapped right back, his eyes just as alight with fury as the king's as he struggled. "I don't need some dirty woodland hunter dictating how I speak. Release me!"

"I'll encourage you one *final* time to correct your tone, *countess* ," the king replied, his grip now on Hannibal's wrists to prevent his struggling, tight enough that he could feel the skin squeezing beneath his palms.

Hannibal had never, in all of his life, had someone handle him as many times as this man had in the short time they'd known one another. Not even his previous captors had dared to lay a hand on him so often, nor did his uncle, and so to be stuck in such a strong grip was baffling and infuriating all in one. And so, Hannibal, having dealt with the likes of Robertus for years instead of a man like this, took the final step over the line, thinking himself to be safe to do so.

"And what will you do?" he spat. "Will you *correct* it for me? Is that another thing I'm not allowed to do on my own? Do I need your guidance every step of the way for that as well, like you're some petty father? Tell me, *Papa* , what will you do?"

Somehow, *that* had done it.

The king's face went through a miriad of stages before practically contorting with rage, and rather than fight the heir any longer about the gown, he grabbed the count's body altogether, hauling him across the room to a chair.

The king sat, ignoring the boy's struggles in his arms as he pulled him over his lap, pressing his body down across his thighs and trapping the young count on his stomach with his arms pinned behind his back, and one of the king's thick legs wrapped around both of those dainty pale ones, preventing him from kicking.

Before Hannibal could spit at him any more for pulling his dress up over his back, exposing his bare ass to the air of the room, he nearly *shrieked* as the first blow came down.

The king was merciless, his broad hand clapping against Hannibal's ass over and over again, ignoring how the boy yelled and squirmed and struggled in his grasp. The pale skin began to redden from the strikes, not that that did much to dissuade the king from continuing.

Aside from the blunt pain that grew to sting, there was another, arguably more unbearable sensation that Hannibal was beginning to experience.

Hannibal could remember, growing up in that castle, seeing various members of the staff disciplining their own children. It was bizarre to him, seeing the switches and the canes and

hearing so many cries. His own parents had never done such a thing to him nor his sister, and Robertus was too concerned with Hannibal being incapable of any real change to bother with any brand of discipline, no matter how clear it was that he damn near wanted to strangle the boy. All of that, dwelling in his imagination, had been when he was a child.

To experience the king's thick, warm hand directly against his heated skin in a way he had never in his life been touched before, done for the first time now that he was just shy of twenty? Aside from how hot the skin of his ass was growing, he could feel a completely different brand of warmth building in his abdomen, making him feel as though he was ready to burst. Even as he cried out for the king to stop, his shouts were coupled with shuddering breaths, the sensation beneath his abdomen growing to heights he couldn't fathom. Between his legs, aside from a horrible throbbing that he craved more relief from than the blows, he could feel the fabric of his dress growing damp where it was touching some of the most sensitive skin on his body.

In one blinding moment, as he truly thought about how little he could move in this position, the king's muscled arms and legs keeping him entirely trapped, the feeling reached its peak.

Whether the king witnessed or not, Hannibal couldn't tell, only because the man did not relent. Not even as Hannibal's cock, sticking downward between his legs, shot out translucent white in what felt like a nonstop stream. His head felt as though he were about to faint, while his entire lower half trembled with the release, his hips bucking into the king's lap as though it could help.

Only once the king registered the motion did he finally cease his strikes.

As though suddenly merciful, Hannibal was given several moments of reprieve, his chest heaving with his panting as he steadily came back into his own body. The king released his hold on the boy's arms, allowing them to dangle down as he collected himself.

At last, Hannibal did not fight him when the king used it as an opportunity to tug the dress over his head and pull it entirely off.

The king stood, scooping Hannibal into his arms in the process, and walked towards the tub. The water was still steaming, but cool enough to touch without burning. He slipped the young count into it, lowering his lower half first before allowing him to submerge himself as

he pleased. Hannibal drew in a steady inhale, his muscles at last beginning to stop twitching as he turned, pressing his back against the end of the tub and stretching his legs outward.

"You make things far more difficult than they need to be," the king said, nearly sounding like he was sighing in the process as he began to unbuckle the fur coat around him.

Hannibal barely heard him, the warmth of the water coupled with the return of his senses and the remaining sting of his ass causing him to focus more on processing what had just happened to his body than anything else. He remained entirely limp, drawing in steady breaths as he returned to himself. He still nearly felt as though he were floating, drifting away in a small, warm sea.

"You're no lycanthrope."

The king turned to him again, having just set down the fur pelt that covered his torso. Underneath was a simple tunic, dark brown and tattered with age.

"You've claimed as much twice now."

"You're no lycanthrope," Hannibal insisted again, his voice just barely above a whisper.

The king, his previous rage seeming entirely forgotten now that he'd taken it out on the boy's backside, pulled up the very chair that he performed the deed in. Once it was just beside the tub, he sat down, pushing the sleeves of his tunic high on his arms.

Hannibal's next inhale came to him sharply, along with a swallow that visibly bobbed in his throat. His head had been turned from the moment the king moved, and now that the distance was taken away, the sight of the king's arms directly in front of him…He attempted to avert his gaze once, solely with the movement of his eyes, only for them to land on a spot of white liquid on the floor near where the chair had previously been. He opted to keep looking at the king instead, humiliation finding its way into his veins the longer he'd looked at his own release.

“Have your people taught you anything of how to spot a lycan?” the king asked, reaching down beside the tub into a bucket, where he plucked out a bar of soap.

It was odd— for a man like this, Hannibal had expected soap made from animal fat. And yet, scenting the air as his eyes briefly closed, he could tell it was made from oils. It was more than odd, it was downright *bizarre* , the thought of this woodland king having access to soap made from perfumed olive oil. To have soap that was not created at home from foul-smelling animal fats required some form of trade between his kingdom and one far away.

It was funny, how something as small as a bar of soap could cause him to call into question just how little he knew about this place, and about this man.

“The usual tales, spoken by old maids,” Hannibal answered, not moving in the slightest as the king lifted his now wet arm from the water, rubbing the bar across his flesh in gentle circles. “Bristles beneath the tongue, the meeting of the brows…Curved claws and a swinging stride.” Hannibal did smile slightly, then, glancing up at the king once more. “It would seem you’re well and truly no lycanthrope.”

“No, I’ve managed to keep my brow nice and trimmed,” the king responded, lathering the soap into the skin by hand. Whether or not he was making an attempt at humor was difficult to tell, given his dry tone. That seemed to be a core trait of his.

Hannibal managed to maintain the silence that fell afterward, deciding that it was in his backside’s best interest not to prod further at the moment. Though, the affair did not leave his mind. He was no stranger to the pleasures that nature provided man, only a stranger to those of the body provided by another. He’d had his nights in his chambers, lifting his evening gown and taking himself in hand when the mood struck. It was rare, but it occurred. To have the same phenomenon occur when he was being treated like no more than a feisty brat by a king, experiencing pain unlike anything he’d handled before…

He glanced down, wondering if the semen was yet washed off of his skin. He wondered if he would inadvertently provide more.

“Neither wolf nor man is solitary,” Hannibal spoke again, only when the king’s hands entered his hair, ignoring the tangled length for the time being to scrub in gentle circles at the count’s scalp. Hannibal had disturbed the silence again, if only to distract from the way his eyes

instinctively fluttered upward at the sensation, his entire body chilling and warming simultaneously from the king's fingers tugging on the strands.

"Men are plenty solitary," the king corrected, continuing his lathering. Whether he knew of Hannibal's plight or not was unknown, but then again, he'd yet to comment on the young count's seed on his floor. "Many take it to be abnormal, and yet many men choose that life."

"Most would say that men are forced to be solitary, regardless if they claim it to be a choice," Hannibal countered, closing his eyes and swallowing. "What has you feeling the need to be solitary, sire?"

Suddenly, and with enough force to make the boy gasp and clutch at the sides of the tub, the king grabbed fistfuls of his hair and yanked backward. In doing so, the king glared directly down into the boy's eyes.

"I've told you to stop that," he said. "Whatever title your people have decided I have is not for you to use. Can't even ask for a name, you rude thing?"

With his head pulled back, his wide eyes staring directly into the king's, Hannibal's throat bobbed again on a swallow. Still holding onto the sides of the tub, he could feel a vague warmth in his belly, similar to before. He wondered, for a moment, if this was how his captor would torment him. If he knew very well what he was doing, and this would be the brand of humiliation Hannibal was to face at his hands. A victim of human anatomy, as he was for his entire life.

"What is your name?" Hannibal asked, the words leaving his throat more hoarsely than he would've liked.

"William," the king answered simply, releasing him at last. His fingertips continued their gentle circles, now scrubbing away the sting of his own tugging force. It sent tingles down Hannibal's spine, as well as a new thrum of arousal through his gut, recognizing just how easily this king could bring him consequences and soothe the ache in equal measure. It was a feat that was devastating in its beauty.

And he craved more.

“My na–”

“I know who you are, Count Lecter,” William interrupted gruffly. “I am not ignorant to the important people of your land, least of all to those closest to my den. I’d simply not seen your face before today.”

Hannibal’s mouth closed in time with William raking his fingers downward, untangling the dirty blonde hairs that extended down to Hannibal’s shoulders. This king had mockingly referred to him as “countess” earlier, he remembered, and given Hannibal’s prior experience with the others, he hadn’t even noticed. After a life lived without his true status acknowledged…it felt odd to hear his title spoken aloud now.

“You said no titles,” Hannibal replied, finally, as William began to use his cupped hands to rinse the lathered soap from his hair. “Does that not count for me as well?”

“Your title is one you were born with,” William answered. “Mine is one your people decided on. The two cases are not the same.”

Hannibal opened his mouth to speak, before he heard–

“If it would serve you better to hear your name instead of the title you’ve been denied, so be it. Tell me your name.”

At this, Hannibal sat upright, turning fully around to face William properly.

“You know of my position being taken, and yet you don’t know my name?” he asked. He wasn’t incredulous by any means, simply confused and deeply, deeply curious. “What do you know of me, then, if I may ask?”

William only watched him, silent again. His face had settled back into its typical stony nature, not so much as looking like he was considering the question. After a few moments, he reached forward, carefully taking Hannibal by the shoulders and turning him back around, before pulling him backward into his proper position and letting him settle back down.

"I know of the Lecter family," William answered, continuing to wash the soap out of the count's hair. "I was nearly thirty when the old bastard took over. Last I had heard, he had no heir. So no, I do not know your first name, because I've no idea which *Lecter* you are."

The remainder of the bath was spent in silence.

William was careful about where his hands travelled to. Despite his prior brutality, he seemed to be a respectable enough gentleman not to bathe anything that wasn't a head or limb. Hannibal was allowed to take the soap into his own hand, to clean his chest, his stomach, and anything below. In the meantime, the king had moved his chair to the end of the tub, taking his time ensuring the cleanliness of the count's feet. All of this, done in complete silence.

As the water grew cool, William stood from his chair and came around to Hannibal's end of the tub. From there, he stuck his hands beneath Hannibal's arms, lifting him upward and out of the water in one swift movement.

Hannibal did not struggle then, landing keenly on his feet. Entirely quiet, he allowed William to wrap a shawl of fabric around his shoulders, keeping him from shivering as the water on his body hit the air. Only as William smoothed it over his skin did Hannibal speak again.

"You believed you were rescuing me, didn't you?"

William froze.

"Excuse me?"

“You fancied yourself a hero,” Hannibal went on, looking up at the king with a small grin. “Poor little unknown county heir, denied his rightful title…A noble by blood yet not by trade, perfect to wed to a king by trade yet not by blood. Isn’t that right? Wouldn’t that make me so appreciative?”

Hannibal could see it again, that twitch in William’s jaw and eye, one that the man tried to swiftly correct by averting his gaze and setting his jaw tightly in place.

“You’re no smarter than when you arrived,” William muttered.

“I believe I am,” Hannibal corrected, shucking off the linen that covered his nude body and allowing it to fall to the floor. “You blame promises that were never made to you, you blame my dress, my hair…You blame my being left alone, even. And yet you will not admit, not even between solely ourselves, that you took me from my home because you desired it.”

Hannibal took a step forward then, even while he had to crane his neck to properly look up at the king. William, silent as he was, stared down with contempt.

“You said you’ve heard of the Lecter family,” Hannibal continued on. “You called me countess, you know of Robertus claiming no heir…You did not know my name. Tell me, William, did you think I was Mischa?”

“You’re crafting stories, boy,” William replied, his voice low and his tone potent enough to sting. “I asked your name because I have a sense of *manners* , and as stated, I’ve no clue which of the Lecters you are. What exactly do you mean to accuse me of?”

“She would have been old enough to wed in four days time,” Hannibal said, his eyes nearly frenzied despite how still his face remained. “You plucked who you thought was an heiress from her home, taking her from such an awful, *awful* place. You would have been her savior more than her husband. Tell me, then, William, did you think to rescue her from your woods when you were *nearing thirty* , as you say? Did you so much as consider saving her when it mattered?”

Faster than the boy could react, William grabbed a fistful of his hair, yanking it upward hard enough to make the young count cry out, reaching up and grabbing at William's hand and wrist in an attempt to lessen the sting. Hannibal was brought onto his toes, his bare chest puffing as he gasped through the pain.

"Mind how you speak," William hissed directly into his face. "You are spouting *nonsense* . I do not have the same patience for your antics as your uncle, crude as he is. He may not have wanted to deal with you, but I assure you, if you take that tone with me again, I will ensure it will be difficult for you to sit for the next fortnight."

The moment his sentence ended, Hannibal spat in his face.

William's face flinched for a second, his eyes briefly closing as the strand of saliva coated his lashes on one eye. He lifted his free hand to wipe it away, opening his eyes again to glare daggers at the boy in his grasp.

"That is not a tone," Hannibal insisted, grinning victoriously.

His grin did not last long. William, still using his grip on the boy's hair, dragged him right out of the bathroom, letting Hannibal's feet dance across the floor for balance as he tried and failed to wrench himself free. Even then, Hannibal was not truly afraid, more incensed than before as he attempted to pry William's hand off of his hair. He figured that the worst the king could do was the same as before, and by God, he was ready for that now.

No, fear did not truly sink in until he watched as William dragged him back into the old bedroom, before pulling a leather belt off of the wall.

"No, no–!" he pleaded. "Lord, *no* !"

William tossed him onto the edge of the bed, holding him down by the back of his neck to keep him bent over. The young count scarcely had time to register his new position before the king began with a brutality Hannibal had never anticipated.

The first swing sang through the air before it landed, snapping across Hannibal's already reddened ass with such a bright sting that he cried out immediately, his nails scraping across the fur pelts that coated the bed in a failed attempt to get some traction. Now, the king was even less merciful than he had been with his hand, cracking the thin strip of leather down in quick, repetitive motions onto Hannibal's backside, creating bright red markings over every bit of skin it landed on.

The young count was nearly screaming throughout, continuing his helpless clawing at the furs and at William's hand, his current position not allowing him to lift his feet from the floor to kick lest he lose his balance altogether and fall, worsening the yanking of his hair. Even then, with such horrible pain, his senses chose to focus on the strength of the man performing the vicious act, the muscled arms that held him in place and punished him so mercilessly, the furious face of a horrific, beautiful man…

As the terrible warmth in his gut bubbled over once again, Hannibal nearly snarled.

"Stop!" he screeched again. "I'll– I'll spend over your bed, you *filthy* old man! I'll soil your pelts!"

"Will you?" William barked back, yanking Hannibal upright once again only to lift him and toss him onto the bed, having him land on his back now.

William descended upon him before Hannibal could so much as move to shield himself, gripping his throat to pin him in place before continuing his lashings. This time, the thin leather strip cracked down on Hannibal's exposed, hard cock.

Hannibal *shrieked* , his legs drawing upward and kicking in an attempt to shield his vulnerable groin. Though every time he tried, his legs were simply whipped away, resulting in his swollen genitals being struck yet again. He clawed at William's hand, knowing fully well that his screams were reverberating through the palm of the king's hand that was pressed to his throat, but even drawing blood did not dissuade the king from his task.

"Little whore!" William hissed. "Leaking onto my bed even while being dealt with like this! Not an ounce of shame!"

As though the pain and exposure itself was not humiliation enough, the king was entirely correct. The head of Hannibal's cock was leaking clear fluid, more than William had ever seen even from himself. The fluid coated the head before long, and William had to avoid it altogether to avoid ruining his belt. Even throughout his excruciating punishment, and throughout his screams, Hannibal was physically incapable of hiding his arousal.

After what felt like it could have drawn on for hours, though was likely only a minute or two, William dismounted from the bed, walking away to hang his belt up once more, as though it was yet again a simple accessory and not a weapon.

Hannibal remained on the bed, turning onto his side as he clutched at the furs, his face nearly as red as his ass as he sobbed. He couldn't tell when he'd begun weeping, though by now, he wasn't sure it mattered.

"Cruel coward!" he shouted, his voice entirely wrecked from his screaming. "Needing such a horrible tool to deal with me…Can't even do it by hand any more! *Coward* !"

Such was the most shameful fact of his punishment: He could have handled it had it been done by hand. Had he once again felt this near stranger's broad palm reddening his ass, even if it was accompanied by decrying him as a whore, Hannibal could have swallowed it with ease. Such was what he learned before his bath, and now he'd learned that, evidently, he had acted out far too much to even be deserving of the skin of the king's hand.

Humiliated as he was, he could not will away the heat of his belly, his mind replaying the display of the king's strength over and over again.

"Give it a rest," William responded, his voice entirely calm. "I will leave you with this final warning, boy. Your grief will *not* be made to be my fault nor my responsibility, much less when you are a guest in my home. Is that clear?"

The boy did not answer. He only turned his face into the furs, his entire body trembling as he wet them with his tears and saliva, hiccuping with every painful sob.

Some period of time had passed, not even Hannibal was sure how long. It could have been ten seconds, it could have been several minutes. The only thing he could truly focus on was the vicious throbbing below his waist, front and back, painful from more than just the physical agony. Beyond the corporal punishment lay the sentiment behind it: that he was an intolerable thing, that his anger was not warranted. He knew he'd acted out, nearly childish in the way he'd done it, but he hadn't anticipated being *treated* like nothing more than a bratty child.

After the time passed, where he'd spent it grieving whatever this supposedly new life could have been, he felt something warm and soft fall over him. His face turned from the furs below him, only to be greeted by furs above him as well. The pelt had the sort of warmth created from body heat, and a scent that matched…

Hannibal glanced upward, his reddened, puffy eyes settling onto William's face. William was no longer so angry with him, it would seem, but even now, he did not look happy. With the tense lines etched into his expression, Hannibal would almost speculate that William looked upset.

"Hannibal, then," William commented quietly, smoothing his hands over the material to spread it over Hannibal's shoulders. "The county heir who, evidently, did not die as the old man claims. A familiar name, but not a familiar face."

Hannibal did not answer him. He only stared, his eyes still wet.

William wet his lips with his tongue, averting his gaze once again. It seemed to be something he did when unsure of his next step, whether it be because he was trying to figure out what consequences to deliver to the young count…or, apparently, because he was feeling remorseful of the ones he'd already dealt.

Hannibal, despite his current state, found himself curious to what ends William's remorse stretched. Did he have this look in his eye when he returned home from destroying that village?

"Rest here," William said, letting it sound more like gentle advice than the order that it was. "I'll return with food. Shouldn't be long."

Hannibal still did not reply. In one very, very small victory for the king, the boy's hand lifted at last, carefully grabbing the edge of the pelt to pull it closer.

That seemed to be enough. Breath poured quietly from William's nose, the rigidity leaving his shoulders. With a final gentle press to Hannibal's shoulder, he turned, leaving the room and shutting the doors on his way out.

Hannibal laid there on his side, the bed comfortable despite the sins committed on it. It was jarring, settling down from being dealt with so severely and being tucked in like a child, the king's only apology coming in the form of wrapping him snug and safe, even while it was his own hand that had created the danger to begin with.

He scoured his mind for the memory of learning of the lycan king, of his terror, of his brand of justice.

He couldn't allow his mind to become clouded by the thought of the king's physical presence, the warmth that radiated off of his body, the scent of him when he was near…The way he easily towered over the boy despite not being too much taller than him, his strength making him feel broader than he truthfully was.

In reality, William was a king who had destroyed an entire village for harboring one killer. His sense of justified consequences had always been warped, with his definition of "innocence" far too thin for Hannibal to ever qualify.

At least, not after he woke up and opened his mouth. Perhaps even before that, when William realized this wasn't the heiress, but the heir.

Hannibal sighed to himself, pulling closer the pelt that William had worn when they met. He was allowing himself to sulk too far. Just like he couldn't allow his mind to cloud with his own cacophony of feelings about William, he couldn't allow his assumptions about William's perception of him warp his thoughts, either. Hannibal still had absolutely no idea how much or how little William knew about his county, or Hannibal himself, and as much as it would be an easy path to venture down…why would William have bothered to give him a bed, a bath, any of this at all, were he solely disgusted and cruel?

He turned onto his other side, wincing from the pressure applied to his whipped backside in the process. The bed was still warm, thanks to his own body heat, and now he faced the window that showed a view of the mountains instead of just the nearby trees.

He wondered how far this place was from Mischa's deathbed on the forest floor.

Hannibal wasn't sure how much time had passed. The sun had moved, shifting from being directly overhead to beginning to tilt to one side. It couldn't have been more than an hour or two, as he had yet to see the beginnings of a yellow glow against the trees to signify it being a short while to sundown. It was odd, then, to think about just how little time had passed to begin with. He must not have woken up long after he'd been taken, given he was outside in mid-morning…

Either way, William had insisted he would not be gone for long. Their definitions of "long" seemed to differ, but then again, William likely wasn't used to having another mouth to feed.

At this point in Hannibal's life, he was grateful for the effort regardless.

Hannibal could hear the loud, shuddering creaks of doors opening on some floor below. He knew that this room was high off the ground, but he still wasn't sure how far. He did not want to approach the windows yet, unwilling to risk recognizing a patch of trees from years ago. He knew it was foolish, these woods were far too wide for that to be even remotely likely. Even so, he remained frozen to the bed.

Beyond the sound within whatever building this was— clearly more than the simple "hunting lodge" he'd assumed it to be— he could smell the beginnings of a meal downstairs. His stomach gurgled loudly in response, a sound that caused him to draw his knees upward until they touched his chest. He'd eaten that morning, getting together a much larger meal than usual. If the others in the castle wanted to leave him on his own, then he would eat as though he were on his own.

That being said, he couldn't quite understand why he suddenly felt as though his stomach was gnawing on itself, as though trying to break out of its encapsulated state to find whatever could satiate it. It was more nauseating than his earlier pain.

Unlike before, he could hear when footsteps began to approach the doors to the room. This time, only when one of the doors opened did he begin to sit upright, propping himself up on the bed with a hand, the wolf pelt beginning to slide off of his bare shoulders.

William stood in the doorway, observing him for a moment. He was holding a clay bowl, polished and perfectly handcrafted, steaming with the fresh meal that lay inside. Hannibal could smell it immediately, his nose pointing slightly into the air as he did so, his throat and lungs filling with the scent of fresh meat and broth.

It smelled divine. It smelled like a memory.

As William approached, entering the room and sitting down on the edge of the bed, bowl and spoon in hand, Hannibal could detect more than just the meal in his scent. William smelled of sweat and soil, with notes of grass and the faint scent of a hunting dog. Hannibal had only ever encountered a few in his life, but he could remember the smell like he'd encountered them yesterday.

Hannibal looked up at last, his eyes meeting William's face. He seemed more tired now, as though whatever outdoor venture he'd been on to retrieve food took something out of him. A true hunter, then, exerted in the search for a meal.

William's eyes flitted away.

"...It's nothing grand," he said at last, holding up the bowl for emphasis. "It's a meal I always have. I've never cooked for company."

Hannibal's head tilted slightly as his eyes scanned over William's face. It was funny, the way that his captor seemed so guilt-ridden by not being such a successful caretaker, even while

Hannibal's backside still bore the marks of his fury.

"I don't always need something grand for a Sunday dinner," Hannibal replied lightheartedly.

William looked at him again, brows furrowed.

"A Monday dinner, you mean," he clarified.

Hannibal's face fell.

"Monday?" he asked, now looking confused in equal measure to William. "What do you mean Monday?"

"You slept for quite a while after I found you," William answered. "I'd thought you could tell."

That would explain it. The sun had not gone down nearly enough for it to have been the same day he'd been outside in his mother's garden.

Hannibal wondered what was going on at home. He wondered what everyone thought, returning to the castle that evening to discover that he was gone altogether. For a brief moment that burned his very blood, he wondered how fiercely Robertus would celebrate. He wondered if the crooked old man would shout with joy before taking yet another seat on his father's throne, the one that should have been passed to him. He wondered if Robertus would proclaim that the evil has finally left their castle, if he would insist on a celebration of sorts.

Except…

"No one would be foolish enough to send the likes of you to a king, lycan or otherwise. We'd all be killed for sending him a changeling. No, beings of the devil want pretty, holy things to corrupt with their darkness. He would want you even less than the rest of us."

Oh, Hannibal could have *laughed* .

He could imagine Robertus' sheer panic, not in realizing that his nephew was gone, but in realizing what he himself had done. Leaving the rightful county heir unattended, right by the edge of the woods, for the lycan king to snatch up. Hannibal could imagine how the old bastard would *screech* through the halls, demanding everyone search for the boy, just to keep himself sane in trying to convince himself that he did not practically hand-deliver the "changeling" to the lycan king. Knowing that Robertus had gone before his own king, only to absolutely waste his time.

He wondered if someone would tell. He wondered if Robertus could be hanged for that.

For everything.

"Are you worried for him?"

Hannibal blinked, brought back into the present by William's voice. He glanced up at him, brows raised.

"Worried about whom?"

"Your uncle."

Processing the question for a moment, Hannibal bit back a laugh, horribly entertained but not wanting to seem so rude.

"No, absolutely not," he answered. "I'm simply wondering what he thinks of the situation he's created is all. Why would I worry about him?"

“I don’t know,” William admitted. “You seemed far away…And he’s the only other Lecter alive, to my knowledge. Family creates a host of complicated feelings.”

At that, Hannibal did laugh. The sound seemed to surprise William, though he only stared, not commenting further.

“You’re right, though my relationship with my uncle is not very complicated,” Hannibal told him. “One could argue it’s simply nonexistent. We lived beneath the same roof, that was all. I was not his, because in his mind, I was not *truly* his nephew.”

William’s brow furrowed then, perplexed. “Forgive me for asking, but…did he believe there was some sort of affair?”

“No, not by any means,” Hannibal answered. “He thought I was a changeling.”

“...A changeling?” William asked, as though repeating just about one of the dumbest things he’d ever heard. “And he was not convinced otherwise after a certain point in your life?”

“Never,” Hannibal replied. “When I was a child he would gather different irons, poking and prodding at my skin with them in the hopes that they would burn me. They never did, because I am not a fae, but he would rather believe that he was sold the wrong material than believe that I was his brother’s true heir. His madness frightened just about everyone, and so no one dared to remove him from his position, not even when I became of age.”

It was a funny story, in Hannibal’s mind. He could remember being so absolutely baffled as a child, wondering what in God’s name his uncle was doing, and every time he remembered the incident into his teen years, he couldn’t help but laugh about it. Except now, having finally told the story aloud to someone, he saw the look of dawning horror that crept over William’s face.

Followed by rage.

“...When you’d told me he convinced others that you were inhuman, I thought it was nothing more than an insult,” William told him. “You mean to tell me that he was *genuine* ?”

“He thought his brother’s children both died in these woods,” Hannibal answered, shrugging mildly. “In a way, I suppose he was right. There wasn’t a single aspect of my life that was the same when I returned. Any grieving old madman could make the claim.”

“Perhaps at first,” William countered. “After a while you’re simply mad.”

“You’re not often a fan of madness as an excuse,” Hannibal pointed out.

William kept his eyes on Hannibal’s face for a moment, before glancing back down at the bowl. He shifted slightly forward then, which certainly got Hannibal’s attention, before he lifted the spoon from the bowl, filled with meat and broth, and he held it out for the young count, who was apparently not going to reach for it on his own.

Mildly confused, yet endlessly intrigued, Hannibal leaned forward, accepting the bite of food with grace. That seemed to settle some of the tension from William’s body, to Hannibal’s curiosity.

“Madness is a tragedy,” William went on, now having decided to continue his spoon-feeding of the meal to the boy in his bed. “Madmen, more often than not, don’t desire to hold onto their madness. It is everyone else who makes the decision of how to treat the matter. In most cases, they decide wrong. Men who need assistance are killed, and men who should be killed are coddled. There is no justice in madness, only further madness.”

Hannibal, still holding onto the fur pelt that covered his nude body, gratefully accepted each spoonful of the meal, eyes big and bright as they looked up at William with each intake. William seemed more inclined to look at the spoon itself than at Hannibal’s face, and whether that was because he could not meet his gaze or because he simply cared more about the food being eaten was difficult for Hannibal to tell.

It was still so very funny, how concerned about caretaking this man was…

Something seemed to click for Hannibal then, as he carried on with his meal, fed by hand by the man who had dedicated so much of his day already to handling him in various ways. Between his bath, his discipline, being tucked safely into bed with the assurance that William would return before long…

"He is a monster and yet he is a man," that baron had explaind. *"More monster than man, but man all the same, despite what the count believes. A king with no council, nor consort, nor heir. A man just as any other, solitary in a way that is unnatural for either creature within himself."*

The man before him was indeed a man, regardless of whatever may lay beneath the surface. Just as any man, he was filled with rage and care in equal measure, wielding both like weapons whenever the need should arise. Men desire companionship, men desire mates…

Men also desire fatherhood.

Hannibal managed to hide his grin, his lips wrapped around the mouth of the spoon for one of the final mouthfuls of his meal, his eyes still locked onto William's face, who seemed to be dealing with this feeding with grave seriousness.

Feeling paternal, William?

At long last, after the silence that fell after William's words of wisdom, the bowl was emptied. William set the clay bowl down in his lap, using his thumb to wipe excess broth off of the corner of Hannibal's mouth as Hannibal simply stared his way. He still wondered where William got that piece of pottery from, if it had been sculpted by another along with his home, or if he had been so solitary for so long that this place and everything within it was crafted by hand.

Such a skilled hand, William was sure to have. Hannibal knew that very personally by now.

William rose at last, moving to carry the emptied bowl from the room. Hannibal allowed him to begin his leave in peace, but as William stepped through the doorway, Hannibal made himself be heard.

“Thank you, Papa.”

William froze in place for a chilling moment, before turning to look over his shoulder, eyes wide. Hannibal, this time, did not look to be mocking him. Hannibal was still sat upright in bed, William’s pelt wrapped around his body to keep him warm. He looked smaller here, especially from this angle, and he blinked with eyes that felt innocent enough to receive mercy.

William swallowed, departing without a reply.

Hannibal grinned.

He granted William his time to depart, waiting in bed for several minutes after he’d no longer heard footsteps. After the time passed, each moment spent dwelling on his fascinating discovery about the other man, Hannibal pulled the warm pelt off of his body and stepped down from the bed.

He was able to locate the bathroom with ease, finding his gown discarded on the floor. It made him frown for a moment, before he shook his displeasure and reached for the dress, lifting it and pulling it back on overhead.

It was an amusing thought now, to remember what had gone on in there before. What he’d hissed in William’s face during their argument over this very dress. He was put over William’s knee for being *correct* .

He stepped out of the bathroom, making his way down the hall and to the staircase that he was seeing for the first time. The stairs, like the walls, were wooden. He was reminded of tales told when his Aunt Murasaki was still alive, of laborers who would build homes from wood without the use of nails. He wondered if William was so skilled.

Hannibal glanced around the halls as he made it to the bottom of the stairwell, sparing glances out of the windows he saw on either end. Despite how high up everything had seemed when he was in William's bedroom, it would seem that this here was the first floor. He could imagine where they might be, based on the view from back home. Up on the nearest mountain, unable to be seen by him until now.

He turned right, heading down that hall until he hit the open door on the very end. The room within was cozy, yet still warm and smelling of food and fire. This was William's kitchen, with a fireplace where a pot still hang, and a–

Hannibal turned, now face to face with a hefty rack of antlers. The deer head was still mostly intact, albeit it being severed from the rest of the body. The body lay on the table beside it, almost expertly skinned and gutted. William seemed to be quite the butcher, Hannibal thought with a smile.

He did wonder, though, where the majority of the meat had gone. Hannibal had received a rather normal portion for a stew, and yet this stag was even larger than him.

He looked up to the window on the wall behind the table, spotting the deer's pelt hanging up to dry. Hannibal couldn't recall anywhere so far where he'd seen pelts that did not come from predatory animals, and if anything, that deer pelt seemed to be the first William felt inclined to save. Hannibal wondered why.

His eyes drifted to the holes and gaps that were pierced through the skin, sloppily stitched for the purpose of letting the entire flesh and fur remain intact, as though William required as large of a piece as he could get.

Odd, then, how the deer seemed to have been bitten into by a predator before it died.

Hannibal turned to take his leave and explore other unknown rooms, only to freeze in place, now facing the wall that had the doorway he'd entered from. There, on a little shelf, just low enough for him to see, were very human bones.

They were small.

Questions burned his mind as they sprouted forward. William was not the sort of man to take trophies, nor was he the sort to kill mindlessly. He was a hunter, a bringer of justice, and a man with a soft spot for the innocent. Questions about those bones could not pop up fast enough. Their origins, their placement…

Well, Hannibal had already made up his mind for what he'd do after he'd finished exploring, anyway. If he had any questions, he would bring them directly to William himself.

And Lord, was he loaded with curiosity.

Hannibal nearly trotted through the hallway on his venture to find William again, peering into a room at the center of the whole structure at last. It felt similar to Robertus' old meeting room that he'd gone into not so long ago, with its wide entrance and its dark green walls, though this time the walls were so not because of an atrocious taste in decor, but from using the nature William found himself in as means of home decoration. There was yet another fireplace, carefully encapsulated in stone like the one from the kitchen. Hannibal wondered, with the different rooms being on the same floor and all, if William had managed to build those himself as well. Perhaps that was why the second floor had so little rooms; there was not one, but *two* chimneys outside.

William was sat in the very center of the room, in an old, large chair made from braided bits of wood. Hannibal could have smiled at the sight alone. No, of course William would not even have manufactured furniture. Wicker was far more in line with his tastes. Had he made that himself, as well?

And yet, in his hand was a goblet, something he could not have obtained on his own. Whatever he drank from it, Hannibal could smell the alcohol from the doorway, and hear the soft puffs of air that escaped William's lips after every sip.

The William in that chair did not look like the skilled hunter Hannibal had first encountered, nor the king he had heard so much about. Currently, in that chair with his legs extended outward and his ankles crossed, leaning back as he sipped on his ale, looking every bit as melancholy as he was peaceful, William seemed more like an exhausted father who'd come home at last.

Hannibal tucked his hands behind his back, holding onto one with the other.

“Papa.”

William jolted, his head turning to the side as he just managed to swallow down a mouthful of his ale. His legs uncrossed and drew upward enough for him to sit up properly, his glass setting down on the table beside his chair.

His brows furrowed.

“Stop that,” he insisted, looking away once again. “You know my name.”

“You let me before,” Hannibal replied, nearly pouting as he spoke. He just about *was* pouting, actually. It was hard to think of his expression as anything else.

William glanced at him again, for a brief second. He did not reply, unable to get himself out of the corner he’d been backed into.

Hannibal stepped forward, walking into the room at last. He made his way inside until he was standing directly beside William’s chair, hands still clasped behind his back.

“Can I sit with you, Papa?”

William looked up at him, puzzled and enticed all in one convenient gaze. It was as though he was confused by his own enticement, though he did not yet seem to be willing to question it. At least, not fully.

“There’s nowhere to sit,” William answered.

Well. If William was going to be so dense, it would seem that Hannibal would have to be bold.

It was a pleasant surprise when William did not stop him from climbing directly onto his lap, scooting in close and leaning against William's warm torso. William was shocked for the first few seconds, before his arms began to awkwardly hover, looking for something to do about this. At last, William wrapped an arm around Hannibal's middle back, his other draping over Hannibal's legs.

"Comfortable?" William asked sardonically.

Hannibal only smiled, giving a nod before leaning his head against William's shoulder.

"...What happened to the others, Papa?"

William, seeming to have resigned himself to this fate, only looked at him quizzically. "What others?"

"The wolves, Papa."

William tensed beneath Hannibal's body, though he made no visible sign of agitation. A question born of innocent curiosity was simply that, and William seemed to understand. Though, granted, Hannibal knew the sort of dangerous territory he was prodding at. His innocence came in the form of not having it already been explicitly told to him— and for now, seeming much smaller than before, curled up on his caretaking captor's lap.

"It's a complicated tale," William answered, clearing his throat and attempting to keep his voice more stable than it had started to become. "Some of those pelts were never men, only wild wolves that ventured too far into the wrong territory. Others were indeed lycans, though not very smart ones. One man's bold idea is another man's madness."

Hannibal listened intently, eyes big and bright as he looked up at William's beard during the telling. William had already expressed that he believed madness to be a tragedy. Was it, then, that the use of those pelts were not for insult's sake? Not pesky things reduced to useful objects, but instead honored tools in his life? Worn on his skin and laid out by his side for as long as they could last, just as he'd hoped they could have in life?

"Did you fight them, Papa?"

Hannibal was very deliberate now, not wanting to risk stepping too far now that he was already in choppy, uncharted waters. He did not want to directly inquire about William slaughtering his own kind lest he face some sort of consequences, be it as dull as being turned away or as brutal as feeling his belt again.

"Yes," William answered, his fingers beginning to tighten as they were clasped around Hannibal's gown. "Yes, I did…I was not given much choice in the matter. Their lives or mine. To live or to die myself."

"Were you their king, Papa?"

"We had no kings," William answered, smoothing out the fabric that he'd clenched. "No, it wasn't such a devastating hierarchy as that. We had a single higher rank, with one leader at that, whose decisions would be made by consulting the others. We were the pack's protectors, though at the end of the day, lycan or otherwise, no one could deny the nature of the parts of themselves that were man. Greed and lust for power ran rampant, one pack became two, two became three…"

William stopped with a soft, yet sharp inhale of breath. Hannibal's hand had come to William's chest, his brows knitted in worry.

"Were you hurt, Papa?"

The tension in William's body began to dwindle, and he pressed his lips together for a moment, petting his hand down Hannibal's back, and his other down Hannibal's thigh. He nearly looked as though he wanted to console the boy, given that the boy was trying to

console him. At the very least, William seemed to have some level of appreciation for the gesture.

"Very," he answered. "I had minimal injury, but my wounds were not physical. When I'd become a man, I'd entered a thriving circle of people that made me feel as though I were no longer a beast, or some spawn of the devil only good for slaughter. After everything…I was back where I'd began, some twenty years ago. Alone."

For a brief moment, Hannibal could feel his heart flutter beneath his breast. Nearly twenty years ago…somewhere around when he was born. William had thought himself alone, unaware that somewhere nearby, someone was being born who would ensure he would never be alone again. Hannibal had to physically restrain himself from grinning within William's view.

"Papa…Are there other lycans out there?"

"I'm sure of it," William answered. "There are territories beyond yours and mine. They could be anywhere."

"Do lycans mate for life?"

William chuckled softly then, his head tipping back against his seat. "To my knowledge, it depends. Most prefer to, while others mind less."

"Somewhere between wolf and man?"

"Yes, that's right."

"Do lycans who want to mate for life propose the way that humans do? Is there a ritual?"

William, for the first moment after the question was asked, seemed more than willing to answer, thanks to the natural progression of their conversation. Once he processed what he was being asked, however, his already opened mouth stilled, and he closed it again in a thick swallow.

Hannibal had caught him. Whatever the answer was, realization had just dawned on William that it would, in fact, be something he was interested in. Some brand of proposal ritual he would be conducting for Hannibal, were he to decide to go through with this marriage. William had yet to reveal any intention of returning him to the county, and yet he had not yet confirmed intentions to wed. Only now, caught in his own web of revealing his history, did his intentions make themselves known.

Hannibal allowed himself to smile then, shuffling somehow closer, lifting his head.

“How do lycans propose, Papa?”

William drew a deep inhale, his eyes casting off towards the wall, then the fireplace, then back to the wall.

“Your people use wedding bands, small rings to signify that you’re wed,” William explained. “We upgrade our coats. We hunt a pelt for our betrothed, and we sew bones into the outer layer.”

Hannibal, feeling delight creeping from his stomach to his throat the way one would feel bile, remembered the image as clear as though it were directly in front of him of the hunted deer pelt, hung up to dry in William’s kitchen with the rest of its corpse.

“We gift the bones of someone meaningful. A deceased loved one, an enemy…Some bones of importance.”

And, almost feeling that bile now, Hannibal remembered the bones on the shelf.

His mind nearly didn't accept it. The notion that, after all these years, after the memory of her was tucked away in the woods with his escape…he'd returned to the woods, and he'd returned to her body. There, right in front of his face, he had seen his sister's bones.

The ill feeling progressed to a shivering fever, his stomach twisting into knots in both disrepair and devastated rapture, every fiber of his being getting plucked and strummed like an instrument in the lycanthrope's hands, fiddled with inside and out as though it had been the simplest task of all.

No, William had not mistaken him for Mischa. But he had returned her to him.

That snout of a lycanthrope indeed, hunting through the woods for a meal, for a pelt, and for bones that smelled so similarly to the boy he'd left in his bed.

He had returned her, along with a vow that Hannibal would never be alone again, nor would William.

There was no physical response strong enough for his joy. He could weep and smile and laugh and jump with glee, none of it would matter. None of it could amount to any of what he felt in that moment, undone and bound back together, sat upon the lycan's lap.

Hannibal's thighs pressed together, a soft, shuddering breath leaving his lips as his hand pressed harder against William's chest. The heat in his abdomen from earlier had returned with a vengeance, his gratitude having nowhere to go except for transforming into throbbing between his thighs.

"Papa…" he pleaded quietly. "I'm so warm, Papa…Touch me?"

William's expression shifted as wildly as it always did, and such movement was quickly becoming one of Hannibal's favorite traits of his. To baffle him for brief moments before he could put together whatever Hannibal had just done was entertaining beyond belief, even when it included drastic consequences thereafter.

Judging by the expression William settled on, it very much would.

William gripped the wrist of the hand that was on his chest, his brows coming together in agitation.

“Was this another of your games, boy?”

“A game for two,” Hannibal answered, sitting upright in William’s lap and attempting to press closer. “For the excitement of us both…Aren’t you excited, Papa? Was it invigorating to feel me pressed so close, against your–”

William snarled, his capacity for fluid motion proving once again beyond Hannibal’s comprehension as Hannibal at once found himself no longer in William’s lap, but left standing, teetering on the floor with his wrist still in William’s grasp, William lording over him once again.

“Still as eager to be a little succubus as usual,” he hissed. “Even now, when you know the consequences?”

“I know them and I *want* them,” Hannibal insisted, rising to try to meet William’s face. “You’ve seen it yourself, the way my nature moves me even at your cruellest. Does it not satisfy you, to know I would be so aroused no matter what it is you do to me? That my mind and body have both become yours so soon?”

This time, William’s free hand gripped Hannibal’s jaw, erupting a sharp gasp from his mouth as Hannibal’s free hand now came to clutch at his wrist. And there they were, hands upon one another, clutching at the other’s wrist.

“Do you not understand the territory you’re entering?” William warned, his volume rising the longer he went on. “The consequences dealt unto such a harlot in my home are not so light as some belt upon your backside. What I would do to you would leave you shrieking until your lungs no longer propel your voice. Is that what it is you’re looking for, whore?”

“Yes!” Hannibal answered in a responding shout, pawing at William’s wrist and chest. “Yes, I am! Subdue me with your strength, enact your will on my body, I would take it all no matter how much I may kick and scream! Let me feel you, Papa, let me feel the worst of your rage as long as it’s by your hand! Let me fight and have it amount to nothing! Your equal in your home and your *filth* unworthy of humanity in your bed, *that* is what I’ve wanted! How have you– *Oh* !”

William had heard enough. He lifted the young count, tossing him over his shoulder as he stormed out of the room, beginning his quick ascent of the stairs.

Hannibal could scarcely process the flurry of wood they passed, between individual planks of the walls, the doors, the stairs…It all became one large blur as William raced on, before the entryway to the lycan’s bedchamber was suddenly in front of Hannibal instead of behind.

In an instant, Hannibal was toppled from William’s shoulder, swung around so that he landed on his stomach on the bed. He hadn’t so much as a moment to crawl forward before his dress was tossed upward to expose his still reddened ass, and his hips were yanked down to the base of the bed.

“Papa–!” Hannibal yelled, clawing at the pelts of William’s fallen friends to no avail, unable to escape William’s grasp. “Please, have mercy!”

William, by Hannibal’s own direction, did not heed his false pleading.

Hannibal’s hands were grabbed with a similar roughness to his hips, pulled backward and pinned to his middle back with only one of William’s hands. Try as he may, Hannibal could not escape this hold either, no matter the amount of scrambling he did.

Just as quickly, the young count’s shrill scream rang throughout the room, a burning unlike anything he’d ever felt descending upon him all at once. William was not gentle, especially not after Hannibal’s little spiel in his living room. Rather than prepare him at all, William had sheathed himself inside, letting only the small amount of wetness on the head of his cock glide the way.

William's hips snapped forward and back as though there were no resistance at all, the force making Hannibal feel as though he were being torn in half. His shouts of agony did not stop upon the first entry, tears already running down his cheeks from the horrible burning made worse by William's insistence on kicking off a rough, brutal pace.

It was the best thing he had ever felt. It was the worst thing he had ever felt. He wanted it to stop so incredibly badly. He never wanted it to end.

No matter the pain, nor his warbled cries for mercy that wouldn't arrive by his own admission, his cock— which had evidently been much smaller than he had ever previously thought, given what was currently stuffed into him— was bobbing with every thrust, forced to rut up against the edge of the bed. Already hardened, it was accentuated by the thrusting of William's cock suddenly changing its angle, and then–

Hannibal cried out again, though this time his screams of pain were warped, every breath and movement shuddering with such a particular brand of overwhelming pleasure that he could not name it, let alone process it. It felt as though William had found a new humor within Hannibal's body, and had unlocked a manner of delivering him such intense ecstasy that it was beginning to outweigh the searing agony in his backside. Every thrust, no matter how it felt it tore him open, was accompanied by a wave of utmost satisfaction.

And then, still not satisfied himself, William reached around.

Hannibal jolted beneath him, as though suddenly remembering the resistance he'd forgotten. William's hand was now wrapped around Hannibal's little cock, and with every press forward, Hannibal was forced to thrust into William's hand. The two brands of pleasure at once, accompanied still by that burning pain that wrapped itself around every bit of pleasure Hannibal had, made his vision go white for a brief moment, his body unable to comprehend the sensations it was being inundated with.

The warmth in his belly was becoming overwhelming again, a feeling he was familiar with when stretched over William's lap in the bathroom…

"Pa– Papa–" he tried to plead, shifting about and instantly crying out again, his movement only serving to worsen the searing in his ass. "Papa, please!"

The domination of his every sense continued onward, pleasure and pain intertwining into one continuous sensation, unable to be defined by anything Hannibal had ever known in his life. As the next minute went onward, the feeling deep in Hannibal's gut that throbbed between his thighs grew in its intensity, cresting higher and higher towards its peak. It was far worse this time around, a heady pleasure that made his limbs tremble, but a sensation that nearly made him think that he was going to wet himself.

The young count cried out in one continuous sound, starting high as his cock finally began to weep dribbles of white and dipping lower as William began to milk the rest from him, his hand no longer stationary, now actively pumping Hannibal's cock to drag out the orgasm for as long as he possibly could. Of course, it helped that William was still fucking him.

Once Hannibal regained his vision, he could at last make out the gruff sounds behind and above him, a combination of William's heavy breathing and low groans of his own.

Beyond the feeling of fucking into the hole pinned against his bed, it would seem that almost half of the pleasure William was getting out of this came from Hannibal's reactions. His cries of ecstasy and pain, the way his thighs were beginning to twitch and shift all around now that his poor little cock was still being stimulated in rapid strokes despite having already burst against William's bed.

"Please– O–Oh, God…Please!" Hannibal's warbling plea came, his hips shifting in an attempt to find relief from both brands of pain: the stinging of his ass, and the pained pleasure of William continuing to touch his oversensitive cock.

William's only response came in heavier groans, each breath puffing against Hannibal's ear hot enough that he thought it may scald him. William's hips were still snapping back and forth, no amount of vigor lost, but now…

"God–!" William himself was beginning to plead, seemingly at no one in particular. "Christ… *Oh* …!"

A new spark of pleasure cascaded through Hannibal's spine, fierce enough to give his spent cock a painful twitch in William's hand. William was beginning to lose himself to the feeling

of Hannibal's hole around his cock, no matter how freshly torn it was. Perfectly tight for him, then, pierced anew.

Hannibal's mouth had yet to fully close, a nonstop stream of pathetic little noises leaving him at every thrust. He thought he'd lost his ability to scream, with the pain having etched itself into his entire body so that he hadn't quite gotten used to it, but it became too much of a part of him to continue his screeching.

Of course, he was proven wrong on that account.

William suddenly released Hannibal's arms, reaching around to grab him by the throat and pull him upward, eliciting a harsh gasp from the boy, followed by a shriek when William's teeth sank into the side of Hannibal's neck.

William came, grunting into the pierced flesh as he continued to fuck as though his very life depended on filling the young count with his seed. His hand never stopped tugging roughly at Hannibal's spent cock, making the boy twitch and writhe in his grasp.

At long, long last, William set him down onto the bed, pulling his cock out of Hannibal's ass, watching as his spend began to drip down and coat the space between Hannibal's abused hole and his testicles.

Hannibal, for all he was worth at the moment, was gathering his breath on the bed. Every inhale drew his chest high off of the fur pelts, every exhale coming with soft wheezes and groans. His entire body was sore, his hole stinging worse now that something wet was touching the tears.

He winced, feeling William's hand that had stilled around his cock begin to work in slow strokes again. He groaned louder, his hips twitching as he tried to relieve himself of the sensitivity.

And then, he was left gasping again.

The sensation of William's wet tongue against his hole was unlike anything Hannibal had ever expected to feel, between how sensitive the undamaged skin was and how easy to sting the little torn bits were. William was on his knees now beyond the bed, continuing to stroke Hannibal in hand as he licked his hole free of his own spend, as well as tiny drops of Hannibal's blood.

Exhausted as he was, Hannibal began to writhe again, William's tongue proving yet another powerful foe against his senses. William's hand was stroking and twisting up and down Hannibal's cock— even while most of it could fit in the man's broad hand— moving as though he were attempting to milk the last drops of his reward from the poor boy.

Hannibal could feel that warmth building in his gut again. The pleasurable sensations had long since become painful, so now that he could feel that build, he well and truly thought that he may wet himself on William's bed. He tried to move, but William's free hand clasped around one of his battered cheeks, shoving his hips back down into the bed so that he may finish his work.

"Papa…!" the young count whined, his tone starting as a quiet whimper before exceeding to a more desperate plea as he realized the brand of sensitivity that was going to wrack his body. "Papa, please! Not again!"

Despite his pleas, William continued onward, and as a result, the horrible sensation crested again. Hannibal cried out, his voice entirely wrecked from his previous shrieking, his cock now leaking a much smaller amount of white directly onto William's fist. William did not seem fazed, forcibly carrying Hannibal through every peak and valley of his second orgasm, until the young count's hips finally stilled against the furs.

William stood, and Hannibal could hear the filthy sound of him licking and *slurping* behind him. Just thinking about William drinking Hannibal's seed off of his hand was enough to send another of those sparks to Hannibal's cock, making him groan in pathetic agony.

Limp and aching everywhere possible, Hannibal did not resist in any way when William pulled his dress off yet again, nor when he scooped him up into his arms. His head felt as though it had been filled with cotton, but moreover, it was filled with nothing except the achingly beautiful notion that he had just lost his virginity to his future husband.

William carried him to the same side of the bed he had been laying on previously, lifting the fur blanket to set Hannibal down properly, pulling the furs back over and ensuring they were wrapped snuggly around him, and that the pillow at the head of the bed was properly beneath Hannibal's head.

The next minute or so felt like yet another blur, with Hannibal vaguely able to make out William's clothes being peeled away from his skin and tossed onto the floor on the other side of the room. Eventually, all Hannibal could see was the bare flesh of his groom to be, before William approached the bed from the other side and climbed within.

As William lay beside him, draping an arm over Hannibal's used body to pull him comfortably closer, Hannibal could feel the overused wells of his eyes stinging with new tears yet again.

Never, in the entire span of his life, had he felt more loved than he did in this moment.

Hannibal pressed closer, and William allowed it, wrapping his broad arms around the bride to be— doting, protective, and possessive all in one gesture.

"...Am I yours?" Hannibal asked, his voice frail and broken from its extended harsh use.

William's eyes opened again, his tired gaze settling on Hannibal's face. For what may have been the first time, William smiled at him.

"And I yours," William assured. "Rest now."

Hannibal's eyes fell closed, a few lone tears squeezed out by the motion. Sleep came to him easily, given the exhausted state of his body and mind.

Hannibal dreamed of his mother's garden, of kneeling by the flowers side by side with her at the castle that was once their home, before gazing over their shoulders to smile and laugh at the commotion behind them.

He dreamed of a little blonde girl, running around through pink flowers in a sunlit field by the edge of the woods, and a large, dark beast rolling through the grass and keeping her giggling.

The woods took and gave in equal measure. He knew that well by now.

And it was beautiful.

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